

Marry Me

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Marry Me

by [dracoqueen22](#)

Summary

Rodimus does something stupid, and Ultra Magnus has to save his plating. Swerve is voluntold to assist, but fortunately, he doesn't mind one bit.

Notes

This has some mild spoilers for recent MTMTE issues, but is relatively safe for work (up until the last few happy chapters).

Bribe-fic Gift for nothumanafterall.

This fic doesn't touch upon the revelation with Ten because this author didn't read that issue until this fic was more than halfway done. And the requester was fine with me not rewriting it to include not only that revelation, but what some of that information might affect in the characters. This story will also feature hints of Cyclonus/Tailgate. There are a LOT of characters on the Lost Light. I narrowed down my focus for this fic so expect only cameos from most of them.

Chapter 1

It was all Rodimus' fault, as most things usually were.

Because Rodimus was the Prime of doing Stupid Things. He was ludicrously good at doing stupid things. He was so skilled at getting in over his head that Ultra Magnus thought his Rodimus Star should have been for extracting the co-captain from the holes he'd dug himself rather than 'Neatest Handwriting' and other various accomplishments.

Ultra Magnus also blamed Ratchet. The irascible medic seemed the only one capable of smacking some sense into the *Lost Light* crew. But Ratchet was gone, leaving only a note behind, and those left behind were still reeling. Magnus didn't blame him, but right now, he missed Ratchet's blunt common sense, something that was in short supply on this ship.

It was also Ratchet's fault because his exit had left a hole in the crew and though few would say so aloud, they would miss him.

It was why Rodimus suggested they stop at Exelon Five. He said the entire crew could use a break and they were lightyears away from Hedonia. Exelon, Rodimus said, was the entertainment hub of this sector. With its overdeveloped planet and massive spaceport, Ultra Magnus actually believed him.

Everywhere one looked were gleaming towers, polished roadways, and more development than seemed possible for a single planet to support. It actually reminded Ultra Magnus of Cybertron before the war. The sight sent a pang of longing through him.

Most importantly, however, was that the Exelons welcomed Cybertronian visitors.

So long as your name wasn't Megatron and you weren't the leader of the universally loathed Decepticons. Ultra Magnus made it a point to not mention that Megatron was on board when they requested clearance to land. A task made easier as Megatron wasn't on the bridge at the time.

When asked whether or not he agreed they should take a pause in their journey, Megatron's response had been one Ultra Magnus did not care to repeat. Clearly, Megatron was still reeling from the revelations of Brainstorm's ill-advised journey to the past.

Ultra Magnus should have known not to listen to Rodimus. But informing Rodimus not to do something never worked. And with Megatron continuing to sulk in his quarters, there was no one to keep Rodimus from landing on the gleaming planet. Especially since the rest of the crew was so excited, eagerly latching onto anything that would serve as a healthy distraction.

"A week," Rodimus declared with a grin on his face and his hands on his hips. "We'll take a week. We'll get our groove back. We'll forget all about that Brainstorm... nonsense. And then it's back to the quest!"

Ultra Magnus wasn't sure who Rodimus was trying to convince more.

So he sighed, nodded, and said, "Very well, Rodimus. A week it is."

To Rodimus' credit, he managed to stay out of trouble for five days.

Ultra Magnus was tentatively daring to believe that they might manage to extricate themselves from Exelon Five without any incidents. The locals were friendly and welcomed shanix. There was plenty to keep everyone occupied. There was lots of entertainment to be had from shopping to fictional vids to amusement parks, all of it sized well for Cybertronians.

Most of all, there was *quiet*. Ultra Magnus could walk around the halls of the *Lost Light* without worrying about being barreled into by random mechs or stopping yet another game of Grenade Tag. Reluctantly, he had to admit, the brief stop did much toward alleviating the tension that had been lingering every since Brainstorm's trial.

Ultra Magnus would even admit enj-- enjoy-- not hating this brief vacation.

Until he received the ping on his communications array.

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The residents of Exelon Five did not drink engex. That, however, did not stop them from socializing with the *Lost Light's* crew in Swerve's bar. Nor did it stop them from buying round after round for the crewmembers that they found most entertaining.

They adored Tailgate for one, but then, who didn't?

The Exelons were about the standard for organics in Swerve's opinion. Bipedal in appearance, a little smaller than the average Cybertronian, which meant they towered over Swerve, but someone like Skids could look down on them. The tentacles were pretty weird, and they had extra arms, and their outer dermal layer was a translucent blue, but they weren't ugly. And they didn't stink like most organics.

They were fearless around the Cybertronians. They were either packing some serious firepower or didn't know enough to be afraid. Swerve suspected it was the former. He doubted there was anyone left in the universe who didn't know how dangerous Cybertronians could be.

Frankly, Swerve was glad they weren't afraid. The more carefree they were, the more shanix they spent in his bar. And well, they pretty much defined chatty. Everyone thought Swerve talked a lot. But the Exelons had both Swerve and Bluestreak beaten in that regard. They also had no shame. No topic was off-limits.

Swerve had even seen one ask Rewind if he could see their interfacing equipment! Chromedome had gotten all bristly while Rewind laughed and Whirl was about to trot on over and proudly display his. Thank Primus Rung had enough sense to put a stop to that!

Swerve tilted his head and had a thought. Perhaps he ought to amend the rules of the bar. No briefcases. No swords. And all panels needed to remain closed at all times. No exceptions.

It was bad enough Mirage was trying to open a "classier" bar. The last thing Swerve needed was to drive offended patrons in Mirage's direction. Swerve didn't want to be the sleazy dive on the *Lost Light*. He wanted to be the friendly, feels-like-home place that everyone felt welcome.

Which meant offending and upsetting no one with unwanted sexual displays.

“Hey, Swerve.”

He turned from arranging his already carefully alphabetized engexes – seriously, it was part of the rules for keeping his bar open. Ultra Magnus decreed – and planted a big grin on his face.

“Yo, Skids,” he greeted, and leaned against the counter. “What can I get for you? No, wait. Let me guess. Another Overdrive, right?”

Skids laughed, his optics lighting up with amusement. “Right. You always know what I want, Swerve.”

“I’m good at knowing what mechs want.” He winked, but Skids had already turned away, scanning the room for others to socialize with. Probably Getaway. Maybe Nautica. Somebody who wasn’t Swerve.

The usual.

Swerve fixed Skids’ engex, handing him the mixed drink and adding it to Skids’ tab. He watched the theoretician walk off with said engex after offering a cheerful ‘thank you!’ only to join Nighbeat and Nautica in the corner.

Shocker.

“My friend, you do not seem to be having much luck.” The thick accent dragged Swerve’s attention to one of the Exelons who had taken up a post at the very end of Swerve’s main bar and seemed content to stay there.

He – or maybe she, Swerve didn’t know, he just defaulted to he because until Nautica, he thought everybody was he, but whatever. Anyway, this Exelon seemed more like an observer. He sipped his drink and watched the laughter and the dancing and the chatting.

“Luck?” Swerve repeated as he took himself and his cleaning cloth down to the end of the bar. No one else was clamoring for a drink so he might as well take the opportunity to have a little chat.

Not like anyone else was clamoring for one of those either.

“With your flirtations.” The Exelon language was strange, all bubbly and slag, but Swerve’s internal translator seemed to work just fine. It gave him an almost Tarnian accent and that was the weirdest part. “No one is responding.”

“Oh. Yeah...” Swerve trailed off, feeling his faceplate heat. Wow. Not only was he a loser that no one noticed, he was one who aliens noticed couldn’t seem to catch so much as a friendly smile in return.

Like frag he was going to admit the truth.

“Truth is,” Swerve continued as he leaned onto the bar, getting closer and lowering his voice conspiratorially. “I’m a one-bot kinda guy, you know? Faithful to the end, that’s me. My partner just couldn’t make it tonight is all.”

“Ohhhhhh.” Multiple eyes blink at him in that sideways blinking thing the Exelons do. “Why, then, do you flirt?”

Swerve shrugged. “Because I can. It's fun. Sells more engex.” He half-lit his optical band, a type of wink that he'd learned from Atomizer. “Part of the job, you know. Suave and charming bartender.”

The Exelon laughed. “Well, I think you fit the part well, friend Swerve. And your partner must be a lucky mech.”

“He sure is. Luckiest mech on the *Lost Light*.” Swerve chuckled and was glad that it didn't come out as hollow as it felt.

Someone else hollered for him and by someone, Swerve meant Whirl, so he excused himself from the Exelon and went to do his job. His conversation with the local alien remained on his mind, but he was simply too busy the rest of the night to go back and speak with him. The next time Swerve looked, the Exelon had left, along with most of his peers and the crowd had become predominantly Cybertronian.

Back to business as usual.

It wasn't until later, when he was cleaning up and most of his customers had departed and Ten planted himself firmly in the doorway that Swerve could breathe anything like a sigh of relief. There were a few who lingered, the quiet ones mostly, one of whom was Tailgate. Good old Tailgate. He could always be counted on to stick around and chat, even lend a hand if Cyclonus wasn't around to brood enticingly in his direction.

“The Exelons are interesting,” Tailgate was saying as he sipped on his Tangerine Dream, sat on his stool, and kicked his legs.

He was infuriatingly adorable and no wonder he could have damn near any mech on this ship. Swerve wasn't jealous. Much.

“One of 'em kept trying to get Cyclonus to show off his vocal skills on a stage,” Tailgate added.

Swerve snickered. “A shame he didn't succeed. I'm sure that would have been epic. Or hilarious. Or both. Epically hilarious.”

“Yep! So now he's hiding in our room and I think he's going to stay there until we leave.” Tailgate laughed and slurped harder at his engex. “Especially since one of them kept trying to feel him up with their tentacles.”

Swerve could just imagine it, too. Though he'd probably go hide in his habsuite if one of the Exelons tried to grope him, too. Or maybe he was just lonely enough to let them...

“Sorry, by the way.”

Swerve blinked and looked at Tailgate, pausing mid-sweep. “Sorry for what?”

“You were too busy to flirt tonight, I guess. No luck, huh?”

Swerve shrugged and paid more attention to his sweeping. Oh, look, another victim of Whirl! Into this dustpan went the shattered glass. He'd be getting another scrawled apology from Whirl later.

Which was improvement.

“Nah, it's fine,” he said and then laughed a little because it was absurd, but Tailgate was probably the only one who would understand. After all, he'd spent a good bit of time lying about the words on his arm. “One of them noticed my lack of success and I lied. Told them I already had a partner. So I made sure to keep up appearances the rest of the night by flirting with none of the zero people who hit on me.”

Tailgate's optics dimmed. “Oh.” He shifted on the stool with a squeak of rusty screws. He set his empty cup on the bar behind him. “Well, there's always tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” Swerve sighed as he picked up what looked to be a mesh cloth soaked in someone's lubricant. Definitely time to update the sign. “I guess there is.”

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He didn't run out of the *Lost Light* per se, but it was a near thing.

“Uh, Ultra Magnus...? I seem to have gotten myself into some trouble. And I need your help.”

He was doomed. Utterly doomed to a life spent cleaning up after Rodimus' messes. He'd barked an order into the comm systems, ignoring Megatron's petulant 'I'm busy' reply, and informed the former warlord to get himself to the command station instead of hiding. Because his co-captain was being an idiot. Again.

“You see, there was this race, and I entered it because their idea of a race car is a joke. And I won, of course I won, it was easy! But, the problem is, I shouldn't have won. Because winning means I'm now their future king and they don't like that. They don't like that at all.”

The prospect of Rodimus being in danger, possibly getting damaged or punished, had been what managed to draw Megatron out of his quarters. He'd strode into the command center as though he hadn't been hiding, nose to the air like a king on his throne. There was a Sharkticon-like grin on his face.

There was little love lost between the two co-captains. But that wasn't Ultra Magnus' problem to solve at the moment. No.

He had to keep Rodimus alive first.

“And now the only way to redeem themselves is to kill me and I'm not interested in going to my own execution, Ultra Magnus. So unless you want to spend the rest of the quest with only Megatron to lead you, maybe you could get your aft down here and save me?”

At least Rodimus had had enough sense to call the right person for the job. Sometimes, Rodimus just didn't think. Trust him to do something as stupid as, oh, calling Blaster or someone else first. It was hard to say with Rodimus sometimes.

No. Ultra Magnus did not run out of the *Lost Light*, but he did transform as soon as he was free of the off-ramp and dove into the core of the city with its towering spires and flashing, neon lights. Of

course Rodimus would choose a place as flashy and gaudy as himself. He knew he should have gone with Rodimus! Why did he ever think Rodimus could look after himself?

Magnus' engine revved. Traffic parted for him, though he was obeying the posted speed limit and the traffic laws he'd discovered on the Exelon intranet. It took him little time at all to arrive at Council Headquarters where Rodimus was being kept. He transformed and took a page out of Megatron's book, striding through the front doors with authority clinging to every inch of his frame.

“Where is my Captain?” he demanded politely.

Although the Exelons weren't small by any means, Ultra Magnus still towered over them. So even his polite voice was quite effective.

The Exelon at the front desk, however, looked at him coolly. “If you're referring to the one called Rodimus Prime, he is in the back office. Through that door and to your left.” And then he looked back at his computer or equivalent and continued typing. Dismissing.

Ultra Magnus squinted at the Exelon. “Thank you,” he said. He'd expected more of a fight. Maybe retrieving Rodimus would be easier than he thought.

As it turned out, it would not be.

He found the back office easily enough and after knocking, Ultra Magnus was let into the large room. He found Rodimus, seated in a chair and draped with chains, far more than must have been necessary. Rodimus' fingers were rapping a bored rhythm on the arm of his chair.

There were four Exelons in the room, two of them pointing a rather impressive looking weapon at Rodimus. A subtle scan informed Ultra Magnus that the blaster was more than enough to remove Rodimus' head from his shoulders. And after, no doubt, put a hole where his spark should be. Oh my.

Another Exelon sat behind a desk, glowering in Rodimus' direction, and there was a second one behind her, smaller and younger. He was grinning from ear to ear, his extra appendages wriggling.

“I have come to retrieve my captain,” Ultra Magnus began with a slanted look in Rodimus' direction. “I understand that there has been some misunderstanding--”

“There is no misunderstanding,” the female behind the desk interjected, her eyes narrowing into slits. A placard on her desk identified her as Grand Regent Prixia. In other words, she was Important. “The rules are quite clear. And we will not tolerate an outsider on our throne.”

Rules? Rules were the engex of Ultra Magnus' existence!

He stared down the female. “Then I must protest. Until I have reviewed the regulations, I cannot, in good conscience, allow this to proceed. Per the Galactic Code, Volume 1301, Subsection B; Paragraph 17, we are entitled to--”

“Yes, yes, I know.” Grand Regent Prixia waved her hand and huffed a breath. Her appendages flicked at him. One hand pushed an item resembling a datapad across the desk. “Here. The last thing I need is another visit from the Galactic Council.”

Indeed. Especially since the Galactic Council had little to no fondness for Cybertronians and thanks

to Rodimus, no liking for the *Lost Light* in general. Though the Exelons could not know that. Ultra Magnus wasn't about to tell them that it probably work in their favor to summon the attention of the Galactic Council.

He picked up the datapad, flicked it on, and began to read. He ignored, for the moment, Rodimus pinging his internal comm. This required the utmost attention.

What he found was most discouraging.

In short, yes, the Exelons were within their right to execute Rodimus in order to prevent him ascending to the throne he had rightfully won. A throne Rodimus probably hadn't even realized he was vying to take. There was no simple solution. The Exelon royalty succession rights were tangled up in the necessity to prove themselves superior in a once a solar cycle race that, unfortunately, anyone was allowed to enter.

Ultra Magnus suspected that there were few who entered with the intention of winning. As the preceding royal line could always put in a bid to execute a winner of whom they did not approve.

The simple answer, of course, seemed to be that Rodimus should just say, "No, thank you. I don't want your throne." But that wasn't an option. By entering the race, he'd declared his intentions. He couldn't change his mind after the fact.

How frustrating.

Rodimus was going to be executed. There was no way around that. But, and here was a loophole that Ultra Magnus almost missed because he was looking for prevention, there was a way to delay said execution. Not indefinitely, but perhaps long enough for Ultra Magnus to come up with a new solution as the Grand Regent was looking hungry for energon and Rodimus' guards looked like they had itchy trigger fingers.

Ultra Magnus sighed.

"I didn't know," Rodimus blurted with an urgency in his voice. "I swear. If I'd known, I would have walked away and never looked back."

"Ignorance is no excuse," Ultra Magnus retorted and he knew he'd won a point when the Grand Regent inclined her head and smiled approvingly.

He tucked the datapad under his arm for further dissection, hoping that the female wouldn't demand it back. Maybe there was something he'd missed that Perceptor could understand. Highly unlikely, but Ultra Magnus was going to exhaust all avenues first.

"Now you see," the Grand Regent said with a gesture toward Rodimus. "We must proceed."

Rodimus made a distressed noise.

Ultra Magnus sighed again. "Yes, but there is one detail that my captain perhaps neglected to mention given his ignorance of your rules."

Prixa's eyes narrowed and she leaned back in her chair, crossing all of her arms. "I am listening."

"There is a provision," Ultra Magnus began as he folded his arms behind his back, "which states that

if the individual in question is required for a duty that no one else can perform in his absence, than said individual's execution can be delayed until after the duty has been performed in full.”

“This is true.” One arm unfolded as the Grand Regent began rapping her fingers on the desk top. “But I understand that you are his second in command, yes? What duty do you claim he must perform that you cannot?”

Ultra Magnus did his absolute best not to fidget because this, here, was the unfortunate part. This was the part that left him squirming as he considered it and a part of him could not believe it was the only solution he could provide. It was so monumentally stupid that he wondered if Rodimus hadn't infected him after all.

“A wedding,” he said.

“A wedding,” she repeated and her eyes became narrower, if it was at all possible. “You cannot perform a wedding?”

“Not if it is my own,” Ultra Magnus clarified.

Rodimus sucked in a ventilation so fast that he started to cough. Ultra Magnus wasn't sure if he was laughing or in denial, but he tossed his captain a bland look anyway. Rodimus bent forward, his vents wheezing.

The Grand Regent blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“He's... he's engaged,” Rodimus managed to say as his chains rattled around him and the blasters pointed at his head wobbled with threat. “It's a recent thing. I totally forgot about that. But yeah. He's engaged. Aren't you, Magnus?”

Magnus squinted at him. Rodimus was deriving far too much pleasure from the threat of near-death.

“Yes,” he said, “I am.”

He drew himself up straight and looked the Grand Regent right in the eye. Er, eyes.

“I am engaged,” Ultra Magnus repeated, louder now, for the sake of all who were listening. “And as the second in command of the *Lost Light*, the only one who can perform the ceremony is Rodimus.”

Please, for the love of Primus, he hoped they did not ask about Megatron. He hoped no one had mentioned Megatron or Megatron's place on the *Lost Light*. Because if they did, Ultra Magnus was going to have to lie again, and he did not like this first lie.

Though he liked the idea of Rodimus without a head even less.

“That is highly convenient,” Prixa said as she leaned forward, glaring at both of them.

Ultra Magnus conceded her observation with a tilt of his head. “Yes, but to be fair, my existing engagement has no bearings on the fact that my captain mistakenly entered a race. It was not relevant until now.”

Her fingers laced together in front of her as she looked over her hands at them. “So you say. But I also find it interesting that my cultural investigators tell me everyone on your ship is either attached,

married or single. No one claimed to be engaged. And no one claimed to be partnered with you.”

One of Rodimus' guards coughed into a tentacle.

“Oh, right, except for one mech.” She waved a hand of dismissal. “He declined to give the name of his partner.”

Rodimus lurched forward, rattling his chains again. “Well, process of elimination, lady. That was obviously Magnus', uh, promised. He's the one with the, uh...” Rodimus trailed off and tossed Ultra Magnus a pleading look.

For the love of Primus, it had better not be Whirl. He was the only one likely to lie like that for reasons unbeknownst to anyone but Whirl. Ultra Magnus could not imagine the ramifications of trying to get someone with as little tact as Whirl to give off the necessary subtle performance which would be needed here.

The Grand Regent picked up a piece of paper and read in a bored tone, “He was very pleasant and friendly and I appreciated his red and white paint. After being surrounded by the larger Cybertronians, it was nice to have a conversation with one who was shorter than I.” She put down the paper and looked at them both. “Does this sound like your fiance?”

Ultra Magnus' spark dropped into his tanks. To be fair, most of the mechs on the *Lost Light* were shorter than Ultra Magnus. Though the color of the paint did narrow down his suspicions.

“Um, maybe?” Rodimus said, but he sounded confused.

Magnus would have to speak to him another time about learning his crew better. But for now, he sighed.

“Swerve,” Ultra Magnus acknowledged aloud and resisted the urge to scrape his hand down his faceplate. “Yes, Swerve is my... we're getting married.”

Rodimus outright cackled.

Chapter 2

"I still say this is most coincidental," the Grand Regent said as she rose to her feet, every bit of her filled to the brim with disappointment. "But the laws are clear. We must stay the execution in the face of this revelation. Now..." Her gaze affixed itself to Ultra Magnus'. "When is the wedding?"

Ultra Magnus' engine rumbled. More lies would have to be told. He did not like this. He did not like this at all.

"Two weeks," Rodimus supplied, certain to be fully investing himself in this. There was a twinkle in his optics that did not bode well for anyone. "And while he's busy making the, uh, preparations, I need to be there. To maintain order. And stuff."

How precise. Ultra Magnus glared at his captain. At this rate, they would see the ruse in a matter of moments. Rodimus was not at all skilled in the art of subterfuge. Then again, neither was Ultra Magnus.

The Grand Regent stared at the both of them, suspicion all but wafting from her translucent dermal layer. "Very well," she said. "But I can hardly let you go without taking precautions." Her eyes flicked to one of the soldiers guarding Rodimus.

He snapped to attention, turned on a heel, and quit the room. No doubt he'd been sent to fetch something that would ensure Rodimus' cooperation. Ultra Magnus did not know what it was, but he was certain Perceptor or Brainstorm could make short work of it. The crew would not be happy, but a quick exit from Exelon-Five was now necessary.

"Surely you don't intend to keep him imprisoned throughout the duration of our preparations?" Ultra Magnus asked.

"Of course not." Grand Regent Prixia's smile turned what Ultra Magnus could only describe as wicked. "But we are not unfamiliar with handling your kind. We have learned how to invoke certain measures."

Ultra Magnus did not like the sound of that. Neither, apparently, did Rodimus. He froze in his chair, not even the chains rattling.

"What kind of measures?" he asked.

"Rodimus, your transgression ensures that not only do you have very little rights, but that they are within their right to effect whatever means necessary to keep you in your place," Ultra Magnus stated. He hoped to forestall any reckless acts on Rodimus' part.

Do not screw this up, he wanted to yell, but he couldn't. Not in front of the Exelons who could decide at any moment that this was all a farce and pull the trigger on that cannon pointed at Rodimus' head. As annoying as Rodimus could be, Ultra Magnus still wanted him to keep his head. That way he could strike it later. Perhaps beat some sense into him.

Where was Ratchet when they needed him?

Rodimus harrumphed, but he sat back in his chair.

An uncomfortable silence descended. Ultra Magnus resisted the urge to fidget so instead he pulled the datapad back out and began to read it once more. He was determined to find some loophole, some misplaced semi-colon, that would get them out of this ridiculous mess.

The soldier returned, carrying some sort of box which he presented to the Grand Regent. Her smile widened even further as she opened the box, revealing a thick metal band with a locking clasp and hinge.

“Now,” she all but purred. “You may release our prisoner.”

The sinking feeling in Ultra Magnus' spark grew heavier. In fact, it settled in his tanks as the soldiers unlocked Rodimus' chains and let him rise. He knew, without having to ask, where that band would go.

His suspicions were confirmed when the Grand Regent clasped it around Rodimus' throat with a cheerful chirrup. Ultra Magnus heard the click-whirr of a mechanism locking into place. He also knew a tracking collar when he saw one. He had no doubt the glowing lines running through it – like biolights – indicated that it was full of explosives.

“You may return to your ship,” the Grand Regent said, something in her tone hinting of smugness. “But should you attempt to leave, this will activate.” She tapped a finger against the front of the collar though Rodimus was quick to flinch away. “It is a necessary insurance, I am afraid.”

Her words were apologetic, but her tone lacked sincerity.

“Explode?” Rodimus repeated with a skreel of static in his vocals. “What do you mean, explode?”

Ultra Magnus took him by the elbow, pulling him toward the door. “We understand,” he said. “Thank you for your consideration.” He all but thrust Rodimus out the door ahead of him.

“We will want to celebrate your engagement, of course,” the Grand Regent said, forcing Ultra Magnus to pause in the open doorway. He turned toward her to acknowledge her statement.

She moved back behind her desk, gracefully sliding into her seat. “Parties and the like. I'll contact you with further details.” Her smile could have been matched by a Sharkticon.

Ultra Magnus inclined his head. “Of course,” he said. “Much obliged.” He hurried out before she could place any further burden upon them.

The Grand Regent still managed the last word.

“Congratulations,” she said right before the door slid shut behind them.

It clicked into place, leaving Rodimus and Ultra Magnus staring at each other. Or glaring in Ultra Magnus' case. He was Not Happy and he wanted his captain to know it.

Rodimus grinned. “Before you say anything--”

“To the ship,” Ultra Magnus said, his words clipped. “Now.”

And yes, Rodimus outranked him, but in this moment, he did not. In this very moment right here,

Ultra Magnus had deemed himself the one in charge and Rodimus was to march his flame-painted aft back to the *Lost Light* before Ultra Magnus booted him there.

Ultra Magnus did not speak, because he knew if he did, it would be unpleasant. He needed time to formulate a response that was coherent and not a sharp chastisement. Rodimus did not respond well to chastisement. It made him more belligerent rather than less.

Rodimus broke the silence as they arrived at the *Lost Light*. “Now,” he said. “I know what you're thinking.”

“No,” Ultra Magnus bit out through a clenched jaw. “I don't think you do. I must protest--”

Rodimus patted him on the arm. “Relax, Magnus. It'll be fine.” He grinned and winked, which failed considering the glaringly obvious collar around his throat. “Percy will take a look at this thing, disarm it in two seconds flat, we'll call everyone back to the ship and break atmo before the Exelons even see what's coming. Piece of oilcake.”

Ultra Magnus twitched. “I do not approve of telling falsehoods. More so, I do not approve of antagonizing one of the few planets who do not despise our kind.”

“I could always legitimately bond you and Swerve if it makes you feel better.”

He ground his denta and heard a skreeling sound that was not pleasant. “That is not the better solution either.”

“You have to learn to flow with it, Magnus,” Rodimus insisted. “It'll all work out. You'll see.”

Ultra Magnus twitched harder.

It would not, in fact, work out.

Four hours later, Perceptor made a “hmm” noise that was not indicative of a positive outcome. His optic narrowed as he thumbed his chin.

“Hmm,” he repeated.

“Tell me you can take it off,” Rodimus begged. He was starting to sound panicked.

Ultra Magnus could not blame him. His bravado started to falter the longer Perceptor examined it. Even Brainstorm had declared it impossible and he was normally one to hold back until Perceptor had issued his verdict. First Aid had taken one look at the thing and said that he wasn't a bomb expert, it wasn't wired into Rodimus' frame, there was nothing he could do.

“Hmm,” Perceptor said again.

“Perceptor!”

“No,” Perceptor finally answered as he drew back. “I cannot remove it at this time. I would, however, like to run a few tests. But I suggest you prepare yourself for the possibility that in two weeks, you are going to die.”

Rodimus stared at him. “You are the smartest mech on this ship.”

“Hey!” Brainstorm interjected.

“Between the two of you, the combined intelligence in this room consists of more than eighty percent of the overall scientific intelligence on this ship,” Rodimus continued.

“Perhaps closer to ninety,” Perceptor corrected.

Rodimus flailed his arms. “And all you can tell me is that there is nothing you can do?”

“No,” Perceptor said. “I indicated I would need to run more tests. Would you like me to attempt to remove it now with a seventy percent chance it explodes? Or later once I’ve run some simulations and acquired a better success rate?”

Rodimus stared at Perceptor for long enough that Ultra Magnus thought he was seriously considering the options. He squinted with one optic and then the other before he whirled toward Ultra Magnus, planting his hands on his hips. He smiled brightly and Ultra Magnus' spark took up permanent residence in his tanks.

“Well,” Rodimus said. “It looks like it's time for plan B. So do you want to call Swerve or shall I?”

0o0o0

The cheerful chirp of his comm woke Swerve from recharge and he fell out of the berth from surprise. As he lay there on the floor, spark racing and his head aching, he answered the comm without bothering to check the sender's ID.

He would later regret that hastiness.

“Swerve!” Rodimus said with a cheerful clip to his vocals. “We're in need of your expertise so why don't you hop on down to my office and give me a hand. You're not busy, right?”

Busy? Why of course not. He was only recharging and after that he figured he might as well get to the super invigorating task of wandering around the *Lost Light* to see if anyone minded him tagging along.

“No,” Swerve answered as he hauled himself to his feet and brushed off his plating. There were several unpleasant streaks on his legs, but who would notice. “I'll be there in a minute.”

“Great! See you soon!”

The comm ended and Swerve cycled a ventilation. He looked around his quarters, stared at the empty berth opposite him, checked his energon levels, and found no reason to delay. He headed for Rodimus' office and wondered what crazy thing Rodimus needed him for this time. More metallurgy knowledge? Hah.

When he arrived, Ultra Magnus and Rodimus were the only ones present and Swerve's spark did that little flutter it always did when he saw the former Duly Appointed Enforcer of the Tyrest Accord.

Swerve planted a smile on his face, hoped he wasn't in trouble for something again, and said, “You called?”

“Come in, come in,” Rodimus said, urging him with a come-hither gesture. “Have a seat.”

There was one empty chair so Swerve headed to it, edging around Ultra Magnus' knees so as not to inadvertently brush him. Ultra Magnus did not like scuffs.

“No, no, no,” Rodimus said, waving his hands. “Not there!”

Swerve squeaked when Rodimus swooped over, picked him up as though he wasn't two-thirds the co-captain's side, and deposited him in Ultra Magnus' lap.

Um.

Swerve froze. Dear Primus, don't let his vents kick on. That would be beyond mortifying.

“Yep, right there!” Rodimus declared and formed a rectangle with his fingers, squinting with one optic at both of them. His smile was a special brand of Rodimus mischief. “Yep. That's a happy couple.”

Happy couple?! Swerve gaped at Rodimus like an Insecticon in high beams.

Swerve felt himself being lifted again as Ultra Magnus set him in the empty chair next to Ultra Magnus, leaving Swerve's head spinning. What in Primus' name was going on?

“Rodimus,” Ultra Magnus chastised with his trademark frown. “That was uncalled for.”

Rodimus leaned back against the desk, looking proud of himself. And what was around his neck? It looked clunky and uncomfortable and – it contained explosive devices? What in Primus' name?!

“Why do you have a bomb around your neck?” Swerve asked. He hopped his chair back by several feet, the legs screeching over the metal floor. It was a pretty big bomb, too, judging by the composition of it.

“It's a long story,” Rodimus began.

“He did a foolish thing and now he's due to be executed unless we can figure out a way to remove the collar,” Ultra Magnus interjected. He sat on his chair, the frown lines deeper on his face, his palms flat on his thighs.

Swerve resisted the urge to stare at him.

Rodimus palmed his face. “You have no talent for storytelling,” he muttered before clapping his hands together and returning his attention to Swerve. “In short, yes, that is what happened. The Exelons want to execute me but luckily, Ultra Magnus knows how to speak legalese and managed to buy us some time. That's where you come in.”

Swerve's optics rounded. “You're going to be what?”

“Executed,” Ultra Magnus supplied and he worked his jaw, optics narrowing. His hands kneaded harder against his thighs. “Unless we figure out a solution.”

Swerve choked on his next breath. He waved his hands through the air.

"I'm a metallurgist," he said. "Not a bomb disposal expert. I can't disarm a bomb. Not that I've ever tried because I don't want to blow up. But that doesn't mean I want to try. Why don't you ask Brainstorm? He's the weapons expert here."

Rodimus stared at him.

Ultra Magnus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I don't need you to disarm it," Rodimus said. "I need you to marry Ultra Magnus."

... What?

Swerve's optical band reset. All of the air left his vents in a whoosh. His fans stalled. His face heated, surely it was bright crimson now. He reset his audials because he hadn't heard what he thought he heard.

"Um," Swerve said, his gaze sliding toward Ultra Magnus whose face was buried behind his palm. The blue mech could not be more frozen if he tried. "Can you repeat that? Because I could have sworn that you want me to... um... Ultra Magnus?" He couldn't even bring himself to say it. His fingers tangled together, forming knots.

"Perhaps, Rodimus, you should start from the beginning," Ultra Magnus said.

Yes. The beginning. That might help. Because Swerve was beyond confused.

Not that Rodimus' explanation made much more sense. He signed up for a race that he won which, as it turned out, meant he was now next in line for the throne. The Exelons did not like this. The rules stated that the only way to be rid of unwanted successors was to kill them. The only workaround Ultra Magnus could find was to delay the execution, which would give them enough time to find another solution.

The bomb around Rodimus' neck had been the hiccup in the plan. Now they had to go through with the marriage for real in order to keep up the pretenses. Or at least pretend to be going through with a marriage.

"Um." It was all Swerve could say in the face of that much ridiculousness.

All the mechs on the *Lost Light* and they'd picked Swerve for this? He felt he should be flattered and in fact, he was. It didn't matter that the engagement was false. Ultra Magnus had picked him! Ultra Magnus had noticed him.

"And as it turns out," Ultra Magnus continued, the tension refusing to leave his frame, "the Exelons had been subtly investigating us. They already knew that there was only one member of our crew that my fiancée could possibly be."

"That was you, by the way," Rodimus said with a grin and a little chuckle. He leaned back against his desk, folded his arms over his chest. He crossed one leg over the other at his ankle joints. "Congratulations."

Swerve's hope popped like a burst bubble. His smile never faltered, but realization rang through him like a bell of doom.

“Oh,” he said.

No other choice, huh? Well that was significantly less awesome. This fake engagement idea was growing more unsavory by the second.

“I see,” Swerve added and lapsed into silence again. He was, for once, bereft of words. How was he supposed to respond to that?

Thank you for getting stuck with me? I'm sorry that I was the only option you had? This is unfortunate for all of us, but let's make do?

“Anyway,” Rodimus continued, clapping his hands together again. He squinted one optic shut and pointed his fingers toward Swerve, “I'd really like to not die so if you could help me out here, that would be great.”

Swerve fiddled with his fingers and cast another sideways look at Ultra Magnus, but the other mech was staring intently at the wall as though he wanted to be anywhere else.

“Sure,” Swerve managed, planting a grin on his face. “I mean, it's for a good cause, right? And I'm all about good causes. I don't want to see you dead either. Plus, there's no harm in pretending.”

The part of him that wanted to shout 'yes!' to the stars was quickly buried down deep. The last thing he wanted was for either of them to read the eagerness in his field. That would be, well, worse than embarrassing. It would be humiliating, and Swerve's had quite enough of that as of late, thank you very much.

Ultra Magnus twitched.

Rodimus grinned.

“Great! So you're in and Magnus is in and of course, I'm in. Now we just have to make sure the rest of the crew isn't. Right?”

Ultra Magnus stiffly nodded. “No one beyond this room can know that we are perpetuating a r-- ru-- tactical maneuver,” he said. “Else I have no doubt that not only will the Exelons execute Rodimus immediately, but they will most likely execute anyone else directly involved for attempting to circumvent the consequences of Rodimus' actions.”

Swerve gulped. Not only would he have to pretend to be engaged to Ultra Magnus, but there was an element of risk to himself as well? He wasn't sure which part was worse!

He couldn't even tell anyone it wasn't real. He would have no one to talk to, no one to whine about the unfairness of it all. How hard was it going to be to tell himself this wasn't real if he couldn't tell anyone else?

“I mean it, Swerve,” Rodimus said, attempting to be stern. “No talking. No running your mouth. No whispering. No talking to anyone unless you're telling them how much you and Ultra Magnus are in love and can't wait to get married. Got me?”

“Got it,” Swerve managed to force out.

He slid another aside look to Ultra Magnus who hadn't unwound in the least. If anything, Ultra

Magnus looked more tense than before.

“Are you, um, are you okay with this?” Swerve asked, absolutely not fidgeting in his seat as he internally begged Ultra Magnus not to thoroughly decimate him.

Ultra Magnus inclined his head. “It is what must be done,” he said. “For Rodimus' sake and now, for both of ours.”

Right. Necessity. Duty. Honor. All that slag.

Not, Swerve glumly thought, because he had any interest in Swerve at all. Just twist the energon knife a little deeper, Magnus.

“That's great. That's wonderful. We're all in agreement here!” Rodimus gave them both a thumbs up, his grin stretching from audial to audial. “That's, well, that's fantastic. So I guess I'm going to go now, deliver the awesome news to Megatron, and you two can, I dunno, play nice?” He winked.

“There are terms and expectations we must discuss,” Ultra Magnus agreed. He turned in his chair toward Swerve, optics assessing him from head to foot. “If we are to be at all successful in this endeavor, we must all be on the same page.”

Rodimus strode forward and patted them each on a shoulder. “I knew I could count on you both. I'll even give you some privacy.”

He all but strutted toward the door; Swerve stared longingly in his wake. Without Rodimus to serve as a buffer, that was going to be more than awkward.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Rodimus said as he keyed open the door and whirled back toward them. He walked backward out of the office. “I'm the only one allowed to 'face on my desk, got me?”

Swerve spluttered.

Ultra Magnus frowned.

The door shut before either of them could formulate a response: a denial on Swerve's part or a recitation of the Autobot code on Ultra Magnus'.

This left them alone. Staring at each other. Or rather, Swerve was staring at Ultra Magnus, immediately missing Rodimus in the awkward silence that fell.

“So...” he began, and planted a bright smile on his face. “You do this often? Get engaged? Or, you know, only when Rodimus is in mortal danger. Which is pretty often, I'm coming to learn. He's like a magnet for trouble.”

Ultra Magnus sighed and scrubbed his palms down his thighs. “It is an unfortunate situation,” he said gravely. “We shall have to make the most of it. But only if you are comfortable, Swerve.”

It wasn't like he had much other choice, right? Either he helped or Rodimus' head exploded and well, that was a lot worse outcome than a fake engagement. A broken spark would mend with time but not an exploded head. That much explosive? Would probably kill anyone in the room with him too. That was some powerful stuff.

“Yeah, sure. Let's do this thing. I'm good with it. Are you good with it? Because, you know, we should both be comfortable, right? Otherwise they'll probably be able to tell we aren't really engaged if you flinch or something.”

“Indeed.” Ultra Magnus nodded slowly, his field loosening from its tight furl so that Swerve could get a taste of it.

There was no excitement in his field. Swerve tried not to let himself get too disappointed. This was only pretend. He would have to keep reminding himself of this, else he might get in too deep.

“So,” Swerve said brightly. “Rules. Regulations. Plans. You have them, I'll bet. I'm sure you don't want to wing it. I mean, I'm not the best at improvisation but if you want me to try, I'll give it a go.” His legs kicked out.

Ultra Magnus turned fully toward him. “We should leave very little to chance,” he said. “It is important that we understand our... relationship, down to the tiniest detail.”

“Right.” Swerve nodded, his spark palpitating at the thought.

A relationship with Ultra Magnus. It was like a dream come true, except not, because eventually he would wake up and it would prove to be not real after all.

This was such a terrible idea.

“What should we talk about first?” Swerve asked.

But Ultra Magnus wasn't looking at him anymore. He was tilting his head, optics narrowed, and then he lifted a hand, pressing it to his audial.

“One moment please,” he said.

Ah, a comm. Well, that was not surprising.

Swerve resisted the urge to whistle, a new trick Chromedome had taught him, and waited. He watched Ultra Magnus' expressions from his peripheral vision and watched them go from neutral to exasperation and finally, irritation.

“I understand. I will be there shortly.” He dropped his hand and rose to his feet with a sigh. “There is a disturbance in your bar. We must go.”

Swerve slid to the floor. “What about our conversation?”

“It must wait. This takes precedence as I can't reach Megatron.”

Great.

Swerve trailed after his fiancé, trying to ignore his growing dread. How could a day be both terrible and awesome simultaneously?

Was it too late for a do-over?

Chapter 3

Rodimus did not, in fact, go to the command deck to speak with Megatron. Instead, his first order of business had been to go to Swerve's bar and announce to every one present that Swerve and Ultra Magnus were getting married and it was every crew member's duty to congratulate the happy couple on sight.

No one believed him. An argument ensued. And so, much to Ultra Magnus' chagrin, did a minor riot.

The moment Ultra Magnus walked through the door with Swerve next to him, there was silence. Not immediately, truth be told, but as the first of the rioters noticed him, it was quickly passed onto the rest until a hushed quiet fell.

Rodimus, center of attention in the middle of the room as he stood on top of the bar, grinned and clapped his hands.

"And there's the happy couple!" he declared, throwing his arms out wide. He could not have been more proud of himself if he tried.

The presence at his side drew closer to Ultra Magnus. He felt a little like wanting to be small himself as they were suddenly the focus of intense scrutiny. They had not prepared for this. Why did Rodimus have to be so impulsive?

"Is it true?" someone shouted and Ultra Magnus traced the query to a small group of mechs in the corner, the loudest of them Smokescreen. No doubt he had been the one to ask. That mech was always looking for trouble.

"Of course it isn't," Whirl retorted with a scoff. He lazily tossed a glass into the air and an attempt to catch it resulted in failure. When it shattered, Swerve winced. "Rodimus is trying to play another joke."

"We're not asking you," Jackpot hissed.

"Let Ultra Magnus answer," Mainframe added, never one without the other. They were all but attached at the hip, Ultra Magnus had noticed.

"Fine," Whirl huffed. He pulled out a chair, dragged it closer to Ultra Magnus and Swerve in the doorway, and planted his aft in it. "Well? Is it true?"

The urge to squirm nearly overrode all else. Ultra Magnus cycled a ventilation. All optics were on him, even Swerve's, who no doubt had no idea how to handle this any better than Ultra Magnus did. Curse Rodimus. This was all his fault.

Ultra Magnus cycled his vocalizer with an audible click-click. He nodded.

"Swerve has accepted my proposal," he said, because that was not a lie. That was true. He'd asked if Swerve was okay with this and Swerve had said 'yes'.

"Therefore," Ultra Magnus continued as he lifted his hand and made a grab for Swerve, managing to

rest it on the minibot's upper back, "We are engaged."

And oh, Ultra Magnus could not have timed it better. Because Swerve seemed to know, without prompting, to lift his left hand and reach over his shoulder and rest his fingers over Magnus'. They were shaking, Ultra Magnus noticed, but he politely did not comment on it.

This, technically, counted as holding hands. It was something considered intimate, beyond the realm of simple friendship. And, it was something no one had ever witnessed Ultra Magnus do. It said, in clear terms, that he was serious.

Further proving that Swerve was a natural at this, the metallurgist broke into a large, ridiculously goofy grin that all but emanated happiness. No one looking at that smile could think they were anything but sincere.

There was a long moment of stunned silence. It was as if all the atmosphere had been sucked from the room. Over two dozen bots stared at them, long enough for Minimus to start squirming deep within the armor.

And then the bar exploded into noise and motion.

"Congratulations!"

"I can't believe it!"

"Holy slag! You were dating!?"

"Are you slagging me?"

"I didn't even know Ultra Magnus could date. Is that even legal?"

"Never thought I'd see the cycle!"

A tide of mechs came streaming their direction, smiles on their faces, their fields brimming with delight. Ultra Magnus' optics widened. Swerve pushed closer to him, vibrating with alarm.

In the background, Rodimus slowly climbed down from his perch on the table, grinning from audial to audial. No one paid him any further attention.

I will get you for this, Ultra Magnus thought angrily at him. Not that Rodimus could hear him.

Within moments, they were mobbed. Swerve was all but ripped from his hands, swept away by the combined force of Tailgate and Rewind, whose small size had never fooled Ultra Magnus. Though he was more than a little concerned as Whirl went loping after them, pincers clacking together with visible excitement.

Ultra Magnus' own company was more reserved, but only a matter of degrees. Rung had a pleasant smile as he adjusted his glasses. Skids' wide grin hid no small amount of mischief. Nightbeat gave Ultra Magnus an assessing look as though he could find the falsehoods in the creases of Ultra Magnus' dermal plating.

"Congratulations, Ultra Magnus," Rung said with a felicitous burst of his energy field that was far more pleasant than the barrage others had impressed upon him. "I am very happy for the both of you,

though it did come as a surprise.”

He didn't know the half of it.

Ultra Magnus worked his jaw.

“Yes,” Nightbeat said, tapping his chin. “Exactly when did you start dating Swerve?”

Rodimus was going to pay for this.

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“You must be so happy!”

“Why didn't you tell us?”

“I know how to keep a secret!”

“We could have helped you!”

“And here I was worried because you weren't flirting!”

Swerve managed a chuckle, as nervous as it was, and held up his hands, not too subtly trying to back away from the onslaught of questions that Tailgate and Rewind were laying into him. That Whirl hovered over the both of them, looking more than a little manic though thankfully not homicidal, only amped up the agitation. It didn't help that he kept click-clacking his pincers with excitement.

What was he supposed to say? Swerve didn't know. They hadn't talked about this!

“It, um, was sudden,” Swerve blurted, his fingers twisting into each other. “The engagement! Was sudden. And so was this.” He swung his arms out wide, motioning to his bar in general. “Kinda wasn't expecting everyone to know about it so soon.”

That, at least, Swerve knew was true. And Primus help him, he couldn't screw this up. He couldn't be the one to blame for everything going south. Where was Ultra Magnus? Why wasn't he here to cast a disapproving frown and make sure Swerve didn't screw up?

Swerve craned his neck, trying to see through the crowd. He thought maybe that was Ultra Magnus behind the bulk of Nightbeat and Cyclonus and Inferno. Rung was there, too, a small orange smear in the middle. And this wasn't helping him at all!

“Why didn't you tell us?” Tailgate asked. He leaned closer to Swerve, hands clasped beneath his chin and if such a thing were real, Swerve imagined he'd have sparks dancing in his visor.

Swerve leaned back. “I... uh...”

“Old Stiff probably made him keep it a secret,” Whirl said, sounding bored. He examined his claws, giving them several click-clicks. “Like he's ashamed or something. Maybe I oughta show him different...”

“No!” Swerve all but threw himself at Whirl and hoped that he put himself between wherever Ultra Magnus was and Whirl. “It was my idea. Not his. I just didn't want... this!” He spread his arms again, pointing out the sudden noise and flood of people, all of them making this farce suddenly so very real and Swerve was not ready for this.

“That makes sense, I suppose,” Rewind said with a nod of his head. Where was Chromedome? Wasn't he always two steps behind Rewind? “Though I can't believe you kept it a secret for so long.”

“Oh, ha, ha. Yes, I know. I can't keep my mouth shut.” Swerve rolled his optics behind his optical band and laughed. He wondered if it sounded as forced as it felt. And then he took a second look at Rewind. “Wait. Are you recording this?”

“Of course I am!”

Rewind danced backward as Swerve made a grab for him. The datastick wagged a finger in reproach.

“You know that I'm always recording,” he said. “Plus, this is the event of a lifetime! Ultra Magnus! Bonding to a mere metallurgist.” He raised his hands and spread a pretend banner. “Big news!”

Swerve's tanks lurched. He very nearly purged. “I don't think... can we just... it's not...”

Tailgate patted him on the arm. “It's okay. Ventilate, Swerve. It's just now feeling real, huh?”

“More than it ought to,” Swerve admitted, his shoulders slumping. Oh, Primus. There was not enough engex in the world to make this survivable.

He planted a smile on his face, drew to his full height, and prepared to fight for his freedom.

“Seriously, though. Thanks for all the congratulations. You guys are great and wonderful and so supportive, wow. Didn't see that coming. But, I have to, you know, get back to Ultra Magnus. I'm sure he's missing me...”

As soon as he could find Ultra Magnus. How hard could it be? The mech stood heads taller than ninety percent of the mechs on the *Lost Light* and that was without counting the shoulder pauldrons.

Ah! There! A corner! Trust Magnus to find a quiet one. He was currently seated at a table with other equally quiet mechs. Bluestreak, good old Bluestreak, had already served them, though he'd brought Magnus the wrong drink.

Still... objective obtained!

“Slag right, he's missin' ya!” Whirl said with a chortle and a slap to the aft that would have sent Swerve flying if Tailgate hadn't caught his arm. “Go get 'im.”

Swerve tossed Whirl a glare, not that the rotary noticed, and rubbed his aft. That was uncalled for. It stung, too.

“Go on,” Tailgate said, shooing him away. “Whirl's right, at least. You two should be together right now.”

Rewind, having pulled a chair to put between them, offers a double set of thumbs up.

Swerve managed something like a grateful smile and tore himself away, pushing through the increasingly raucous crowd to the far corner. Ultra Magnus probably only had to glare to clear a path, but not Swerve. He was as unnoticeable as the serving drone scuttling about underfoot.

His enthusiasm faltered the closer he got, however. Because they hadn't discussed expectations or proper behavior. He couldn't just throw himself into Ultra Magnus' lap. That would probably be uncomfortable for the both of them. But they were dating. They were engaged. He was expected to be comfortable with some kind of contact, right?

Swerve gnawed on his bottom lip and approached the table, lingering what he hoped was close enough to be noticed, but far enough that he didn't intrude. He thought to call out to Ultra Magnus, but what was appropriate? Should he use a cute name like “dearspark” or something equally stupid? Maybe the often-loathed “Mags.” If he called out to Ultra Magnus as such, would the others find it weird?

Swerve didn't know. His hands started twisting themselves into knots. Uncertainty ate at his field. He shifted back and forth on his pedes and was two seconds away from spinning on a heelstrut and darting back into the crowd. But then Ultra Magnus turned toward him, prompted by Skids perhaps, and the smallest curve of his lips made him look... happy to see Swerve.

Dead.

Swerve was so going to be dead. Because that teensy-tiny smile went straight to his spark where it strobed fuzzy feelings of delight through the rest of his frame. For a moment, he couldn't breathe.

“There you are,” Ultra Magnus said and he offered a hand, tilting his frame slightly out of the booth. “Care to join us?” His expression was pleasant but there was an urgency and a question in his optics.

Play the game, those optics seemed to say.

Swerve gathered up his courage, grinned, and took Ultra Magnus' hand, not failing to notice how ridiculous his hand looked next to Magnus'. The hand curled around his fingers and then Swerve squeaked with surprise. Ultra Magnus had pulled him onto the former Enforcer's lap. Or well, halfway on his lap. Swerve only fit on one thigh.

Magnus' arm wound around his waist, which kept him from toppling off, and tilted Swerve back against his chest. He could feel the humming of Magnus' frame against his own, along with the heat of him. Field contact was inevitable, giving Swerve his first taste of the mix of anxiety, exasperation, and concern that was Ultra Magnus' maelstrom of emotion.

Dear Primus.

Now Ultra Magnus was leaning over him, a most intimate action, his frame curled around Swerve's until he was wrapped in Ultra Magnus' presence. This put his mouth tantalizingly close to Swerve's audial, a way that they could speak without anyone overhearing.

“Is this all right?” Ultra Magnus asked, his low vocals purring into Swerve's audial and vibrating throughout his entire frame.

He scrubbed his hands down his thighs, fighting off a shiver. “Yes,” he said and anxiously licked his

lips. "I mean, yeah. It's a lot. But I'm fine." Though it depended on the definition of fine.

Because any other time? Swerve would be golden. He would be over the moon with happiness. He wouldn't be able to stop grinning and touching. But right now? With this agreement looming over his head, he couldn't. He kept crashing back to solid ground every time his protocols reminded him that this wasn't real.

"Are you certain?" Ultra Magnus asked, and the concern in his voice, in his field, that was so very tempting. It was beautiful.

Swerve nodded. "Yes," he said, and repeated. "Yes, I'm sure." He didn't know anymore if he was convincing himself or Magnus.

He proved it by resting his own hand over Magnus'. He rubbed his palm over fingers that dwarfed his own, and traced the fine mechanisms of Magnus' knuckles. He pretended he didn't notice that mechs were staring, the impolite ones anyway.

He didn't hear the snickers either. Or the whispers. He didn't feel the dozens of pairs of optics thoroughly fascinated or the fingers pointed their direction.

Nope, his entire focus was on Ultra Magnus. The way their armor fitted together. How warm Ultra Magnus was. How he still didn't have the right drink but Ultra Magnus would consume it because he hated to be wasteful.

Swerve concentrated instead on controlling his own ventilations, so Ultra Magnus couldn't see how rapid they had become. He memorized the weight of Ultra Magnus' arm around his waist. He traced Ultra Magnus' fingers, over and over, and he felt the vibrations of the massive spark against his backplate. He hoped this moment would stay bright and vivid in his memory forever.

"When's the wedding?" Skids was asking, his vocals dim to Swerve.

An energon cube was thrust in his direction, generic engex, not a flavor to be found, but he grabbed it and sucked it down as though it was the purest high grade. It gave him something to do, somewhere else to focus, that way he couldn't frag this up.

"Soon," Ultra Magnus said and his thumb stroked Swerve's abdominal plate, the tip of it brushing the lowest seam of the armor that guarded his spark.

Swerve shook. A bolt of pleasure zinged straight from the bare brush to the depths of his systems. Heat spread through him in a wave of warmth he couldn't avoid.

He'd spent far too many nights with Ultra Magnus' name on his lips and the shadow of him in Swerve's imaginings. This was not helping.

"We haven't discussed the details," Swerve dimly heard Ultra Magnus add to his answer. And how like him, to tell the truth about a lie, skirting exact phrasing in order to protect himself.

"The Exelons have graciously invited us to host the reception on their planet," Ultra Magnus continued. "Apparently, such things are to be celebrated."

"With parties?" Skids asked, a big grin on his handsome face. He leaned eagerly over the table, doors arched behind him. Getaway was nowhere to be seen, oddly enough. Usually you could

hardly separate them.

Ultra Magnus inclined his head. “To my understanding, yes. The Grand Regent said she will contact us later with the details.”

“How kind of them,” Rung said.

“How convenient,” Nightbeat said with a smirk. He had that light behind his optical band that suggested he was very intrigued.

Swerve pressed a little harder against Ultra Magnus, dreading the moment the questions turned toward him. Ultra Magnus' arm was so warm around him. The thrum of his field was so welcome. Swerve's ventilations increased. His spark pulsed louder. It throbbed in his audials.

He went stiff.

Ultra Magnus must have noticed because he leaned over Swerve again. “Your visor is fritzing,” he murmured. “Are you unwell?”

Swerve worked his intake as there appeared to be a lump caught in it. “I lied,” he whispered. His hand squeezed Ultra Magnus' fingers. “I'm not fine. I'm not fine at all. This is too much.”

Was there desperation in his field? Because there ought to be. He was two seconds from throwing himself from Ultra Magnus' lap and pelting out of the room and that wouldn't help their image at all.

“I understand. I will make our excuses. Give me a moment.”

Ultra Magnus' hand never left Swerve's back. But he did straighten and reboot his vocalizer in a subtle way of catching everyone's attention.

“We appreciate your congratulations,” Ultra Magnus said with genuine warmth in his voice. “But there are things that require our attention and we must depart.”

Swerve slid down from Ultra Magnus' lap – he had some dignity left to him! – and planted a smile on his face. His knees were wobbling. He hoped no one noticed.

“Don't worry,” Swerve said. “We'll invite everyone to all the parties and the wedding, of course. You won't miss a thing. Bartender's honor.”

Ultra Magnus rose from the table as well, once again placing his hand against Swerve's upper back. This he used to direct Swerve through the crowd.

“Move quickly,” he urged.

Swerve didn't have to be told twice. He was more than ready to get out of here, to some place quiet where they could finally sit down and talk. Perhaps even call Rodimus to yell at him. Because this awkward situation was all Rodimus' fault and wouldn't you know that their bothersome captain had already skedaddled from the bar? It had better have been to go speak with Megatron.

Or more likely, it was to go cause more trouble.

Whistles followed in their wake. Some of the shouted comments did not bear repeating. Others made

Swerve's face burn and his audials cringe. He felt Ultra Magnus getting more and more stiff behind him, as if only the desperate need to flee was what kept him from turning around to deliver citation after citation.

Swerve didn't feel an ounce of relaxation until after they stepped out of the bar and the doors closed behind them, cutting off most of the noise.

"You did well," Ultra Magnus said.

Swerve blinked, startled. Their rapid pace dwindled to something that was a little more comfortable, though Swerve still had to hurry to keep up with Ultra Magnus' loping stride. The large hand vanished from his back as well and Swerve reminded himself not to miss the warmth.

"I, um, thank you." Swerve twisted his fingers together and looked down, hoping Ultra Magnus couldn't see how pink his face was. "Sorry I had to get out of there. I didn't know what to do or say and the tension was getting to me."

"It is all right." Ultra Magnus, at least, didn't sound angry. "We need to draw some boundaries and delineate the details before we can attempt something like that again. If we have any hope of maintaining this... relationship, then we must be on the same page."

The hesitation before relationship might as well have been a kick to the aft. Swerve sighed and brushed off the disappointment.

"I understand. Completely. Totally. So when do you want to do this thing? Because eventually, I do have to get back to my bar." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I left Bluestreak in charge and he's a good kid, don't get me wrong, but he doesn't know those idiots like I do."

"Bluestreak is more than capable. We must discuss the terms now," Ultra Magnus said and he hung a sharp turn.

Only then did Swerve realize where they were going, toward the Command Deck and Ultra Magnus' private office. He remembered being hauled in there on previous occasions, usually for doing something in his bar without the proper licenses or training.

It was on the tip of his glossa to suggest something a bit more personal, in case anyone was watching or listening in, but the moment came and went. Ultra Magnus certainly knew what was best and the idea of having Ultra Magnus in his hab-suite was... well.

Yeah. Magnus' office was the best place for them to go right now.

"Okay," Swerve said. "You're the boss, Mags-- I mean, Ultra Magnus. I'll follow your lead."

Especially since Swerve's one lead was not much of a lead at all. How was he supposed to know how to pretend to be engaged when he hadn't been in a long-term relationship ever? He'd had a few one night stands here and there, most of which were accompanied by him being the one to leave on the early cycle 'walk of shame'.

His one semi-long term experience was with a fellow metallurgist before the war. It last a month before it fell apart and to this day, Swerve didn't know who to blame more. Sure he talked a lot. Not that it was a surprise. Anthem knew that going in. And wasn't Swerve within his right to ask his semi-permanent partner for a bit more equality in the berth?

Anyway. What it boiled down to was that Swerve simply did not have the experience needed to do this the right way, much less fake it. Sure he could ask Rewind for copies of all kinds of romantic dramas and romantic comedies, but Swerve was pretty sure those sappy story lines didn't work in real life. Plus, Rewind would want to know what they were for and like frag Swerve was going to tell him. Not that he could.

“Swerve.”

He startled and looked up. Ultra Magnus had stopped and was staring down at him, his optics lit with concern.

A nervous chuckle escaped Swerve. “Uhhh, no?” he answered, rubbing the back of his cowling.

“It wasn't a 'yes' or 'no' question.” Ultra Magnus frowned. “Are you all right?”

Swerve laughed and waved him off. “I'm fine. I'm fine. You know how I am with long conversations, right? I just hope I stay awake.”

“Mm. Good point.” Ultra Magnus straightened and reached for the keypad by his door. Somehow, Swerve had followed him here in a daze. “I'll make sure to take copious notes and put them on a datapad for you. That way you can study them at your leisure.”

Great.

Swerve popped a grin on his mouth. “That's awful considerate of you, Magnus. I'll, um, I'll do my best.”

Ultra Magnus gestured for him to enter first. “I know that you will.”

Swerve tried not to sigh. Into the office, it was. This was surely to be a titillating conversation.

Well, at least it'll kill the last trickles of arousal he'd been harboring from the moment Ultra Magnus hauled him into his lap. For this, he was going to need as clear a head as he could manage.

He dearly hoped that Rodimus wasn't anywhere else, stirring up more trouble.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I have the soundtrack for this story on my tumblr if anyone wants to check it out:
<http://dracoqueen22.tumblr.com/post/127674057524/marry-me-soundtrack>

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

If there was one thing that truly irked Ultra Magnus – and Minibus Ambus – it was disorganization and lack of preparedness. Right now, he was wallowing in both. So while he let Swerve pick a place to sit, he went through the entirety of his office looking for something that would be of use for their current predicament.

Sadly, he feared most of the datapads of use were not only fiction, but only available behind the closed doors of Drift's habsuite, buried in Rodimus' desk, or in the back of Ratchet's closet. If the medic hadn't taken them with him.

Ultra Magnus had minimal experience of his own. Well, the persona Ultra Magnus at any rate. One of his previous incarnations had been quite the flirt. He had the vidfiles of that particular incarnation, but it wasn't quite the relationship ideal he was going for. He needed permanent, not 'whomever can be convinced into the berth.' Which back then turned out to be anyone said Magnus smiled at.

Harrumph.

Minimus Ambus' personal experience was thin at best. He'd been on dates here and there. He'd courted a lovely data clerk once. But once his loadbearer's spark was discovered and he'd been drafted into other duties, well, romance had fallen by the wayside. Far by the wayside. After all, Minimus Ambus became no more and Ultra Magnus was all who mattered and he could tell no one the farce. Not even his lover.

Better to keep to himself.

But where experience failed, there were always books. Manuals. Instructions. And Magnus had read quite a few of those. There was nothing wrong with a healthy desire to learn and one never knew when a piece of mild trivia became important.

Now would be one of those times. He'd studied the social requirements of courting in detail, hearkening back to that beautiful data clerk he'd left behind. He'd also studied, in depth, the laws surrounding relationships between members of command. Some of it was delineated in the Autobot Code, but for others, Ultra Magnus had needed to dig deeper for further clarification.

Optimus Prime had been distressingly unconcerned about what he considered appropriate and inappropriate behavior. He defaulted to Iacon Enforcer standard which essentially boiled down to happiness and consent and transfer if necessary. Rodimus had leapt upon such lax requirements for appropriate behavior and adopted them for the *Lost Light* as well.

He'd said, "There are enough of us in charge, Mags, that they can just report to someone else.

Whatever. Don't make a big deal out of it. War's over. Let 'em get what they can out of it.”

Ultra Magnus could not argue with his commanding officer. Not matter how much it made him twitch. It had been one of the things he'd brought up to Tyrest and that... well, that wasn't worth thinking about anymore.

Rodimus' rules stood. He didn't even care about fraternization! He said, “so long as we aren't actively fighting them and they're not spies or whatever, who cares? Let it be, Mags. Let it be. Unbend. Unwind.”

Rodimus was quickly proving to be the burr in Ultra Magnus' armor. And yet, every time he looked at the flame-painted menace, it was with a rush of fondness. Because Rodimus had seen the Minimus within and it hadn't mattered.

So follow Rodimus he would. No matter what processor ache Rodimus gave him. Though their current situation was toeing the line.

Anyway, courting details. Dating protocols. Information. Data. He needed it.

Ultra Magnus finished rummaging through his neat stacks and selected a few datapads he thought would be most appropriate for the situation. These were what he took back to his desk, setting them down on top. He grabbed for his chair and was about to sit down when he noticed Swerve.

How in Primus' name were they to have this sort of conversation with Swerve all but on the other side of the room?

This was important. This task was delicate. It was highly personal. Ultra Magnus could not ask Swerve to pretend to be in love with him whilst a large desk was between them.

He frowned and cast about the room. He had no comfortable furniture like Rung so they could not share a couch. There was a lot less room on Swerve's side of the desk because the Magnus' office was not meant to be comfortable. Well, then. That left only one choice.

“Swerve, come sit beside me,” Ultra Magnus said, scooting his chair over to the side. “It is much more logical for us to discuss this while we are comfortable.”

Swerve slid down from his chair, gaze traveling between the empty space beside Magnus, and the space he currently occupied. “Comfortable,” he repeated. “Right.”

It was a rather large chair. Perhaps he needed assistance.

Ultra Magnus rose, leaned over the desk, grabbed the chair. He lifted it and set it beside himself. He adjusted it to a perfect angle and then patted the seat of it.

“Thanks,” Swerve said, a flash of something in his optical band. But it was there and back again before Ultra Magnus could identify it.

“You are welcome,” he said. “Courtesy is part and parcel to the role we are going to play. I wish to treat you with the utmost respect and while I try to do that anyway, I must take it to another level. Best to get the practice in now.”

Swerve audibly cycled a ventilation. “Practice,” he repeated. “Right.”

He grinned before circling the desk and taking the seat. He was near enough now that Ultra Magnus could detect the edges of his field and the wariness mixed with apprehension.

Well, Ultra Magnus supposed that this particular room did not make for comfort. He had hauled Swerve in here more than a few times for misconduct. It would be a waste of time to change locations, however. Perhaps Swerve would relax with time.

“Now,” Ultra Magnus said, reaching for the first datapad on the stack. “Rodimus has gotten us into this debacle, but it is our duty to get him out of it. The only way to ensure we do not fail is if we are adequately prepared.” He frowned, inwardly casting aspersions toward Rodimus. “Recent event notwithstanding.”

“Kinda hard to prepare for Rodimus, huh?” Swerve said as he flicked on the datapad. “He's unpredictable.”

“The very definition of the term,” Ultra Magnus agreed. He turned toward Swerve, leaning close so that the minibot could see the datapad as well. “Firstly, clarification. Circumstances as they are, we are now 'engaged' with a pending wedding. We need to decide what that means for us. What we are comfortable with.”

Swerve let out a quiet chuckle. “Comfortable. Uh-huh. First we need background, right? Because they were bombarding me with questions earlier, and I couldn't answer them because I didn't know what you were saying, and I didn't want to contradict anything.”

“A wise decision.”

Never let it be said that Swerve was stupid. He simply made poor decisions. But then, that was true of one-hundred percent of the residents of the Lost Light, including Ultra Magnus. Everyone made mistakes.

“Do you have any suggestions?” Ultra Magnus asked.

Swerve fiddled with the datapad. “It has to be believable,” he started and let out another small laugh, though it didn't sound very amused. “Which means it's already a bit too late for that.”

“Not precisely. I am a private individual, wouldn't you say?” Ultra Magnus suggested. He pulled out his own datapad, powering it on. “It is quite plausible that we have been keeping our relationship a secret, especially given the usual behavior of the riffraff aboard this vessel.”

“Riffraff.” Swerve blinked at him and laughed, genuine this time. “I'd say I'm insulted but that's probably true. I don't know how Rodimus did it, but he seems to attract all of the, uh, weird ones.”

“Indeed.” A touch of humor curved Ultra Magnus' mouth. He considered himself one of the 'weird ones.' Though certainly not riffraff. “A good starting point, I think, is Hedonia. It is plausible and anyone looking into it will remember that we interacted.”

Swerve coughed into his hand. “Right...” He fiddled with the datapad. “And we kept it a secret because everyone here teases everyone else mercilessly unless you're Cyclonus. Or Whirl, in which case you don't care who you're going to tease or what pointy object gets shoved in your face. Or optic.”

Ultra Magnus blinked. He tried to disentangle that rush of words and then decided it wasn't relevant and kept going. "Also, I did not want to play favorites or be seen as unprofessional. The personage of Ultra Magnus is very important." He paused, something occurring to him. "Your behavior might be a point of contention."

"My behavior?" Swerve's visor flickered.

Here it became Ultra Magnus' turn to hesitate with discomfort. How to put this delicately? "You are, as they say, something of a... a flirt." He shifted again, the chair creaking beneath him. "Which might seem counter to being in an established relationship."

"We could have an open relationship?" Swerve suggested, but the heat around his face spiked by several degrees from the mere mention.

"I do not see anyone believing that."

"Yeah, neither do I." Swerve's shoulders sagged a little. His field spiked and flattened, still that weird mix of anxiety and wariness. "Maybe it was a cover? You know. So no one would realize we were dating on the down low. Keep up appearances. That sort of thing?"

"Hmmm." Ultra Magnus supposed it made sense. "And given your admission that you did have a partner, we decided there was little point in further perpetuating a ruse." Ah, the irony.

Truth mixed into falsehood. He remembered once reading that the best lies had a little truth in them. That certainly seemed apt now.

"And also because you asked me to marry me," Swerve said. "Because that would have come out eventually so we decided we might as well tell everybody so they could get used to it before the wedding."

"That is acceptable." Ultra Magnus made notes of their 'backstory' on his datapad, remembering to CC Swerve on the final draft so that he would have notes to study. "Now what about public displays of affection? These are essential demonstrations of a couple's fondness for each other."

Swerve sagged a little in his seat. His faceplates once again registered heat. "You're, um, not much for touching people."

"No, I am not." Ultra Magnus sighed. "What is acceptable to you?"

Swerve's gaze suddenly found the wall very fascinating. He rebooted his vocalizer twice; Ultra Magnus counted the clicks. He fidgeted in his chair.

"Casual touching should be all right," he said. "What you did in the bar, your hand on my, um, your hand on my back. That's okay." The wall continued to fascinate him.

Ultra Magnus made note of it. "Casual," he repeated. "Such as a hand on the shoulder, upper back, and lower back. Hand-holding, I assume, is also acceptable. Or a close approximation of it." He paused, remembering the odd sight of Swerve loitering near the table in the bar as though he needed permission. "You may approach me at any time without fear of reprisal. You should be comfortable in my presence."

"Got it." Swerve's gaze wandered back, though this time with intense focus on the datapad. "Um,

Rewind uses 'Domey' a lot. I'm not suggesting that I give you something cutesy or whatever but..."

Ultra Magnus tried not to twitch. "I suppose, given our relationship, 'Mags' would not be inappropriate. If used sparingly." He loathed the mangling of his name, but if it helped Swerve feel more comfortable, he could tolerate it for now.

It was only for two weeks.

0o0o0

Was there a more awkward start to a relationship, even a fake one? Swerve didn't know. But sitting here officially declaring the different aspects of their fake engagement was, well, borderline ridiculous. He half-suspected Ultra Magnus to whip out a contract or something for him to sign.

Anyway.

So far, at least, it was all stuff that Swerve would have no problem remembering. Nothing terribly romantic or anything. In fact, anyone on the outside looking in would find no issues.

Except Swerve wondered, what about the important things? The tiny little details that defined a relationship? The *personal* things?

That was where Swerve hit a road block because, well, he already knew a lot about Ultra Magnus. Probably a lot more than the casual observer slash occasional miscreant should know. In fact, one might almost call it a bit creepy.

Like, he knew Ultra Magnus' favorite drink. This could be excused easily enough. Swerve was a bartender. He made drinks. He had regulars. He knew their drinks, too. Maybe he didn't know what specific engex matched their mood like he did Ultra Magnus. But still. He could explain that.

The other stuff? Not so much.

Who else would know Ultra Magnus' favorite music? Who knew Ultra Magnus listened to music?

Or that Magnus organized his datapads not by title but by author. Because it was more aesthetically pleasing to him. And that Ultra Magnus had actually read every datapad he owned because he liked knowledge no matter what application it might have in the future. If any.

Or that Magnus liked to sit so that he could see most if not all of the room. He didn't like baring his back to unknown entities.

Little things like that. Swerve shouldn't admit to knowing before but could admit now because they were engaged. Fake engaged, but still. He had an excuse to know it. But that didn't explain why he already knew these things.

And worse. Eventually they'd have to go back to normal. Once Rodimus was saved and they were far from Exelon Five, he and Ultra Magnus could tell everyone that the engagement was fake and wasn't it hilarious? And he and Ultra Magnus would have to go back to being third in command and bartender with no relationship between them.

Dear Primus. What had he gotten himself into? How was he supposed to flip flop between that? How could he go from pretending one thing to pretending something else?

How was he going to stop himself from touching Ultra Magnus in the future if he started now? How was he going to forget these intimate details later? How could he forget how nice Ultra Magnus was being, even now, when he'd only seen the stern and authoritative Magnus before.

How was any of it going to help this ache suddenly building in his spark?

No. This was not okay. He was not okay with this at all. And it was too late for him to turn back. Too late to pull out and tell Ultra Magnus to find someone else. Because surprise, surprise. Rodimus had jumped the gun and none of them were prepared for it, least of all Swerve.

Rodimus' life was on the line. And who was to say that the Exelons wouldn't just execute them all for daring to lie? Who's to say they wouldn't go after Ultra Magnus next? And then Swerve?

He was trapped.

Swerve's ventilations hitched. He tightened his grip on the datapad Ultra Magnus had given him, one that was slowly filling with updates on the details of their fake relationship.

How was he supposed to do this? He couldn't even ask anyone for advice. No one else was supposed to know!

“Swerve?”

He blinked and forced himself to ventilate. “I... uh...” And now he sounded like an idiot. What were they last talking about?

“I don't have a nickname,” Swerve blurted.

Ultra Magnus blinked at him. “I asked about your favorite activities.”

“Oh.” Yep. Idiot. There he was. “I like to stargaze and experiment with engex mixes and work on my marksmanship.” Because it was universally known that Swerve was a terrible shot.

He watched as Ultra Magnus scribbled the notes down. “We will have to spend time together in public now,” he said. “Interaction must be initiated between you and myself in equally amounts.”

“You mean dates?”

“Yes.” Ultra Magnus didn't even look at him when he said that. “Though those may not be necessary. The Grand Regent just sent me the itinerary for the celebrations they have planned and there are... many.”

He frowned and it wasn't his angry frown, just a confused one. It was one of Swerve's favorite frowns.

“The first will be tomorrow night,” Ultra Magnus added and Swerve's datapad pinged as the invitation and reminder popped up on a calender. “In a local bar. It appears to be a casual affair, but our attendance is mandatory. No doubt they wish to view the happy couple.”

Oh, yay. A mandatory first date. This could not possibly be more romantic. Swerve would try to contain his enthusiasm.

He nodded. "We should probably arrive together, right? To put on a good show."

His spark swelled. Swerve reminded himself not to think too much of it. It was fake, he fiercely reminded himself.

Fake, fake, fake, fake--

"That is a good idea." Ultra Magnus made another note of it. "We could leave from here together. Perhaps I could pick you up from your bar?"

"Works for me." Swerve injected as much happiness into his vocals as he could spare. In fact, he channeled Tailgate just to make it seem legit. "It'll be nice to go to a party where I'm not the one doing the serving."

A touch of amusement entered Ultra Magnus' field. "Indeed," he said. His stylus flicked across the datapad before he lowered it and gave Swerve his full attention. "Are there any other concerns you wish to address?"

Was he squirming? He hoped he wasn't squirming. It was too late to back out and he definitely wasn't going to tell Ultra Magnus all the reasons this was a bad idea.

"No," Swerve said. "Not that I can think of at the moment. But I know where to find you if I do." Ugh. That didn't sound creepy at all either.

"Indeed you do." Ultra Magnus gave him a long look before he went back to his datapad. "I will suggest that we have regular meetings, however. Both to exchange information and to cement our cover. That way we do not have to worry about conflicting details. Does that seem fair?"

Swerve nodded.

"Glad you agree. Feel free to contact me if you have any concerns outside of our regularly scheduled meetings."

Swerve's datapad dinged a new message, this one with a series of meetings arranged between himself and Ultra Magnus. If anyone ever got a hold of this datapad, their ruse would be revealed. Swerve reminded himself to put it somewhere no one could find it. Given that he shared his habsuite with no one, that shouldn't be too much of an issue.

Ultra Magnus was quiet as his stylus moved over his datapad and Swerve watched him, waiting for the rest. He told himself to follow Ultra Magnus' lead no matter what. Lest he embarrass himself and reveal something he ought not.

Two weeks, he reminded himself. Or even less if they could get that collar off Rodimus and make their escape. After which Exelon Five would be a planet they would never, ever return to.

"There." Ultra Magnus' stylus swept off the datapad with a sense of finality and he turned and placed it on the desk. "I think that is all we need cover for tonight. We have a plan of action, we have a code of conduct, and we have a fully realized relationship that should stand up to scrutiny."

“Sounds like we have all we need then,” Swerve said and he hopped off the chair, skirting around it and the desk.

Being that close to Ultra Magnus the entire time had been more than a little unnerving. He'd felt every ex-vent and Ultra Magnus radiated heat. Maybe he should see Ratch-- err, First Aid about that. Maybe his cooling system wasn't running efficiently.

Or maybe Swerve was imagining things and really needed to put some distance between them.

“So I suppose I'll see you tomorrow,” Swerve continued, tucking his new datapad under his arm. “It's getting late after all and I'll have to get an early start on tomorrow. Blue makes for a great assistant, but not so great at the cleaning. So, you know, I'll have to take care of that.”

Ultra Magnus rose to his pedes. “Nonsense,” he said. “What sort of partner would I be if I sent you to your room alone?”

Swerve's ventilations stalled. Surely Ultra Magnus didn't mean to... to... share a room? A berth? No way would they fit! Not unless Swerve recharged on top of Ultra Magnus and dear Primus, that was not a mental image he was prepared to accept or put into practice!

“Um,” Swerve said.

“It is standard procedure.” Ultra Magnus circled the desk and preceded Swerve to the door, keying the panel for it to open. “Especially in most courting practices. It will also do us good if I am seen walking you to your habsuite.”

All of the gathered air left Swerve in a whoosh. Escorting. Phew. He could handle that.

“You're right,” he was quick to say, hoping that he didn't stammer. “And appearances are what's important.”

Ultra Magnus fell into step beside him, this time matching his pace to Swerve's instead of the other way around. And it felt more than odd to be walking beside Ultra Magnus without a pair of cuffs on his wrists.

Not like that!

His imagination was out of control. Swerve shook his head to clear his thoughts. This was going to be difficult enough with daydreams taking over.

“Swerve?”

“Oh, nothing. Just a thought.” He beamed a smile up at Ultra Magnus. “I have those. From time to time. But doesn't everybody? Ha ha.”

Ultra Magnus blinked, but didn't push the issue.

Sadly, the corridors were deserted and there was no one to witness Ultra Magnus escorting Swerve back to his quarters. What a wasted chance of being seen together. Hopefully whoever was on monitor duty was the gossiping sort. Well, more than the usual anyway. Swerve didn't think there was a single mech on the Lost Light who didn't gossip.

And what would they see anyway? Just Swerve and Ultra Magnus walking next to each other silently. Lost in their own thoughts. Which was probably not helpful.

Chromedome and Rewind were always talking to each other. They were always touching, too. Small things, barely noticeable, but you couldn't look at them without thinking they were obviously together.

“Thanks for the datapad,” Swerve said to fill the silence.

“You are welcome.” Ultra Magnus made a noise of contemplation and rubbed his jaw. “I shall consider other gifts. They are also acceptable methods of display.”

Display. Right. Everything for the ruse.

Swerve sighed and thanked Primus when his habsuite came into sight. He didn't quite run to his door, but it was a near thing.

“Well, thanks for making sure I got here safely,” Swerve said with a little laugh. “Can't be too careful with all the, uh, riffraff around here.” He beamed up at Ultra Magnus and was utterly shocked to find Ultra Magnus giving him a genuine smile in return.

It was small and soft, but it was a smile and it left Swerve absolutely floored.

“No, you cannot,” Ultra Magnus agreed. “Good recharge, Swerve. And thank you for all your help. I am quite sure Rodimus is grateful as well.”

Rodimus. Right.

Swerve absolutely did not deflate. “Well, you know how it is, anything for Rodimus.” He fumbled at the door panel and was relieved when it slid open. “Good night!”

He dove into his habsuite before Ultra Magnus could say anything else that would leave Swerve simultaneously elated and disappointed. The door slid shut behind him and Swerve braced himself against it, ex-venting a long, slow cycle.

His head thunked back against the door. He was in over his head. He was so in over his head it wasn't even funny anymore.

Chapter End Notes

As always, feedback is welcome and appreciated. :)

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Universe: IDW, MTMTE

Characters this chapter: Ultra Magnus, Swerve, Atomizer, Getaway, Megatron, Whirl, Rodimus, Brainstorm, Perceptor, Rung

Rated K+ for this chapter

Warnings for some uncomfortable situations

Commission Gift Fic for nothumanafterall.

Mood Music for this chapter: "Wish I Was Your Lover," Enrique Iglesias

The next day proved that Ultra Magnus had given himself fully to this ruse.

Swerve awoke to someone pinging at his door and when he opened it, there Ultra Magnus was with a cube of energon for him.

"I know you have to clean up first thing this cycle," Ultra Magnus said as Swerve gaped up at him. "I thought this might help with your fatigue. We were up quite late last night."

"I'll bet you were!" Atomizer cackled as he walked by, making sure to stare long and hard at the two of them.

He went so far as to walk backward and ogle them all the way until he turned a corner. And then he peeked back around it quickly as though he might have missed something before vanishing from sight again.

Well. That was sure to hit the rumor mill soon.

Swerve sighed. "Thank you," he said and reached for the cube. "You're probably about to go on shift, right? What am I thinking? Of course you are."

His hand slipped as he wrapped fingers around the cube and he almost dropped it. A quick snatch and it was saved. Phew. That would have been another mess. Swerve was quite tired of embarrassing himself.

"I run no chance of being late," Ultra Magnus said, his weight shifting from foot to foot.

He seemed awkward standing there, shoulders hunched as he looked down on Swerve. The height difference between them bordered on the realm of ridiculous.

"I thought it would be nice to swing by and wish you a good morning and say that I look forward to seeing you tonight."

Tonight?

Oh, right. Swerve's face burned again. This was Ultra Magnus in character. Not Ultra Magnus being

nice for the sake of being nice. He had to remember that. Even if meant reminding himself every second of every minute of every hour.

It was all a ruse.

“Oh. Me, um, me, too.” Swerve managed a lopsided grin up at Ultra Magnus. “But, I actually have to hit the washracks first so you don't have to walk me.”

And while it wouldn't be unusual for two mechs to share the washracks platonically, Swerve didn't know if he could handle Ultra Magnus' hands on him without freaking out. Or betraying how often he'd dreamed of such a thing. Somehow, he didn't think his cooling fans clicking on in the middle of a friendly backscrub would be acceptable.

“I see.” Ultra Magnus nodded slowly. “Very well. Then I will see you later, perhaps at my mid-cycle break.” He bent at the waist in a barely perceptible motion – was that a bow? – and walked away.

Swerve absolutely did not stare dreamily after him. Or admire his aft. Nor did he startle when Jackpot whistled, winked and gave him two thumbs up as he passed, side by side with Mainframe.

Swerve did, however, whirl on a heelstrut and vanish back into his habsuite where he could finish his energon in peace and quiet. And where he could also calm down his rapidly pulsing spark.

It took him the better part of ten minutes to finish his energon and prepare himself to greet the day. He planted a smile on his face, squared his shoulders, and strutted into the hallway.

Let the teasing commence, he told himself, and turned straight for the washracks. A quick rinse to get the day started and then he'd go to his bar to check out the damage.

He had a plan. It was a good plan. But the minute he opened his door and stepped into the hallway, he collided with Getaway.

“Well,” the escapologist drawled, slinging an arm over his shoulders. Or as close to it as he could manage anyway. “If it isn't Swerve, newly engaged to Ultra Magnus. I'm surprised you're walking straight today.”

Oh, Primus.

Swerve's engine screeched with embarrassment. His vocalizer squawked static.

“That, um, that has nothing to do with anything,” he said and wriggled out from under Getaway's arm. Was he lying in wait or something? “I'm walking just fine.”

“Oh, I'm sorry. Guess old Mags is the traditional type, huh?” Getaway winked and jostled Swerve with his elbow. “How'd you get him to loosen up long enough to propose anyway, huh? I gotta say. I'm a bit shocked. I mean, what with you flirting with me last week.”

“A cover!” Swerve blurted, trying to move his feet faster but alas, Getaway easily caught up with him. He wondered if Magnus would cite him if he shifted to alt-mode and raced away. “It was a cover, you know, to uh, cover us.”

Getaway chuckled. “I'll bet it was.” He gave Swerve another wink and elbow jostle. “You fooled everyone. Maybe I oughta learn some tricks from you, eh?”

Swerve managed a small laugh. “Maybe.”

Oh, Primus. Today was going to be the absolute Pit.

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Ultra Magnus headed for the bridge but was intercepted by a frowning Megatron. The former warlord's arms were crossed over his chest and his red optics were as baleful as ever. He presented quite the barricade, forcing Ultra Magnus to stop and wait. Thankfully, the corridor was empty with no one to bear witness to Megatron's posturing.

“Have you no control over that miscreant you call a captain?” the former Decepticon hissed, all of his plating fluffed out. Megatron's field was an agitated thing rasping against Magnus' own as though it were a secondary form of intimidation.

Magnus resisted the urge to rub his forehead. The day had only begun and it was already aching. “I'd ask what he's done, but I feel I already know. I presume he told you.”

Megatron twitched. “In a manner of speaking.”

“Then you know good and well that, no, I don't have any control over him and yes, we are required to do whatever it takes to prevent his execution. That is part of what it means to be an Autobot,” Ultra Magnus said. “Now if you'll excuse me...”

He tried to step around Megatron, but the former warlord was as stubborn if not more so than Rodimus. He smoothly stepped back into Ultra Magnus' path. His glare hardened. His feet planted solidly. He bristled.

Magnus could probably take Megatron now, weakened and unarmed as he was. But it would cause damage and a mess and trouble for public relations. Not to mention he had no desire to start his day with a brawl.

“Was there something else?” Ultra Magnus asked.

“I can't believe you're actually going through with this farce,” Megatron said. His face went through a variety of emotions before settling on aggravation. “You let him get away with far too much.”

Ultra Magnus inclined his head. “And do you have a better idea?”

Silence. Megatron's optics narrowed. His field burst and then withdrew. Magnus wondered if this was how it felt to be Starscream.

“I didn't think so.” Ultra Magnus sighed. “It is a temporary solution to a very real problem, Megatron. So unless you have a better one, I suggest you do your best to maintain our ruse.”

Megatron's orbital ridge ticked upward. “And what part do I have to play in this farce?”

“In order for us to comply with Exelon law, Rodimus had to be our captain. You are now third-in-

command,” Ultra Magnus explained through gritted denta. Though to be fair, that was only if the Exelons asked. Magnus still hoped they remained dark to the fact there was a former Decepticon warlord on board.

Had Rodimus told Megatron nothing?

... Of course, he hadn't. This was Rodimus here. He'd probably waltzed in, announced to the bridge at large that Ultra Magnus and Swerve were now engaged, and pulled Megatron aside to tell him about his new piece of jewelry. Probably in the guise of bragging about being the new heir to the throne here in Exelon.

Ultra Magnus bit back another sigh.

“I see.” If Megatron's frown got any deeper, it would be permanently etched into his face. “Only Rodimus could cause this much trouble.”

“Indeed.” In this, at least, he and Megatron had found a common ground. Though Ultra Magnus had gotten used to the kind of shenanigans Rodimus could cause, it was still new territory for Megatron, who was more used to the treachery Starscream presented, not the absurdity that was Rodimus.

Sometimes, Ultra Magnus wondered if Optimus allowing Megatron to join the *Lost Light* had been the punishment rather than a way to avoid it.

“Now as Rodimus should be spending his time with Perceptor and Brainstorm, and I have a wedding to plan, we'll be relying on you to manage the *Lost Light*,” Ultra Magnus continued, though the very words tasted like stale energon.

Also, it was telling that he felt marginally more comfortable leaving Megatron in command than he would have Rodimus. It was slim, but there was a half-point difference between them. Sadly.

“Fine,” Megatron bit out and he stepped aside, giving Ultra Magnus room to pass. “But when this is over, I think we should all have a nice, long talk.”

“If you think that is going to have any effect on Rodimus' behavior in the future, you are surely mistaken,” Ultra Magnus tossed over his shoulder.

Megatron snorted.

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Swerve barely escaped from the washracks.

He'd thought he timed it well. He figured they would be mostly empty at this point in the cycle. He was wrong.

Crew members bombarded him with questions and congratulations. Or outright inappropriate commentary. Mechs who would have never given Swerve a second look leered at him. Others told jokes that Swerve was too anxious to laugh at.

For once, Swerve was not glad for all the extra attention. He would have been desperate for it once upon a time. He would have luxuriated in it. Now, the added scrutiny was just another stress. And sure they meant well but...

Okay. No. They probably didn't mean well at all. They were just a bunch of nosy slagers all up in everyone else's business because it was a form of entertainment.

No matter how many times Swerve smiled and said "a gentlemech doesn't tell" they wouldn't stop asking him about the size of Magnus' equipment. As if he knew! Okay, sure, he had his suspicions. His faceplate heated to think of taking something that large. But he didn't know. And he wasn't going to get to know.

Frustration!

Swerve sought refuge in his bar. It was too early to be open. He should be the only one there. He could clean and talk to himself and get mentally prepared for tonight.

Except when he got there, he was almost immediately waylaid by Whirl. Of all the two-hundred plus residents of the *Lost Light*, it had to be Whirl. He had no off button.

Swerve sighed.

Whirl cackled. "Good morning, motormouth. Finally emerged from your den of inequity, yeah?" His pincers clacked excitedly. "Come on. How's about you slip me a drink and tell me all about it?"

"The day just started, Whirl. Don't you think it's a bit early for engex?" Swerve asked, deftly avoiding the arm that was probably meant for his shoulder. What was with all the touching all the sudden?

He keyed open the door to his bar and stepped inside, only to draw up short and groan. Dear Primus. It looked like a tornado had been through here. A tornado or one very drunk Whirl.

His optical band flashed as he turned a glare upon said Autobot.

"Wasn't my fault this time!" Whirl protested, holding up his pincers. "Someone got Strafe wasted and he took exception to Repugnus' paint scheme. It was pretty epic though. You missed an awesome fight."

Swerve sighed. "And I'm sure you did your best to break it up." He gingerly stepped over the shattered remains of two chairs. This was why Bluestreak made a poor bar manager. But at least it was better than everyone skipping off to Mirage's bar.

"Frack, no. But I did win a tidy sum of shanix afterward."

Swerve made an appropriate noise of disinterest and went in search of a broom and dustpan. He would also need a mop. And to restock. And where was Ten? Shouldn't he be here, bouncing Whirl on out the door?

Whirl who, by the way, was following Swerve around as though he had nothing better to do and nowhere better to be.

"So," he said with a clack-clack of his pedes. "You and Magnus, huh? Never saw that coming. You

kept a secret, Swerve! Good for you!”

Swerve started to sweep. It looked like he would have to restock some of his glassware while they were on Exelon Five. He swore he went through more broken cups than anything else.

“Don't you have somewhere to go? Somewhere that's not here?”

“Nope. I have all the time in the world to spend with you.” Whirl propped himself on a table and got comfortable. His legs swung back and forth. “So tell me more about Magnus. Does he quote the Autobot Code in the berth? Is it all by the book. One, two, three, overload?”

Swerve choked on his next ventilation. “Whirl! That's none of your business!” He almost dropped his broom.

“Does the Magnus Armor even have interfacing capabilities?” Whirl asked, purposefully deaf to Swerve's protests. “Or does he, you know, take it off to do the horizontal tango? What's Minimus like? Oh, Swerve! Did you finally get to be a mech?”

It took all he had not to violently throw Whirl from his bar. Not that he could. But he imagined himself doing it a few times just to make the urge go away.

He wasn't at all prepared for this.

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Ultra Magnus found Rodimus surrounded by Brainstorm and Perceptor, both scientists staring at him as though he were a mysteriously locked box and they had no idea where to find the key. Rodimus was both twitching and grinning, his field wildly flickering throughout the lab and betraying an unhealthy mix of agitation and glee.

“Well?” Ultra Magnus prompted as he strode into the laboratory. It was impossible to hide his agitation. He was not happy with any part of this situation.

“There is a metal unlike any I have ever seen before,” Perceptor stated. He slowly circled Rodimus, examining him from all angles.

“I didn't even know a metal of this density was possible,” Brainstorm added and he tossed Perceptor a sideways look. “There's no way it occurs naturally. Not unless...”

Perceptor met his gaze. “Black hole?”

Brainstorm nodded. “Black hole.”

Rodimus blinked. “Magic?”

Ultra Magnus barely refrained from echoing him though with a more precise term. “And the circuitry?”

“Complex but not beyond our understanding,” Perceptor said. He made a contemplative noise. “The

issue is the tampering mechanism. It is incredibly sensitive. There are feedback loops for every circuit.”

“Which means...?”

“Boom.” Brainstorm's fingers flicked through the air. “No more Rodimus. We so much as tug too hard on a wire and that's all she wrote.”

“Who wrote?” Ultra Magnus asked.

“The Grand Regent,” Perceptor said. “Or at least we assume. I can only guess that this sort of complicated incendiary device is one of the reasons the Exelons are open to intergalactic visitors. They are more than capable of defending themselves.”

Ultra Magnus rubbed his forehead. “Options?”

“We'll keep looking. In the meantime, try not to agitate them,” Perceptor said. He picked up his datapad and examined a readout on it.

“Also,” Brainstorm added, giving Ultra Magnus two thumbs up. “Congratulations on your pending nuptials. Of all the mechs on the ship, you picked Swerve? I thought you were trying to be believable?”

Ultra Magnus gave him a dark look. “Swerve was a matter of coincidence. Even so, he is proving more than capable of the task.” His performances so far were exemplary. Ultra Magnus had not known him to be capable of such deception until now.

Brainstorm held up his hands. “Wow. Defensive much? I was just observing.” He abruptly whirled back toward Perceptor, peering around the other scientist's shoulder at the datapad. “What about those readings, Percy?”

“It's Perceptor,” he corrected tightly.

Rodimus hopped down from the stool and joined Ultra Magnus as they left the lab and the soon to be bickering duo behind.

“How's that going, by the way?” Rodimus asked.

Ultra Magnus sighed. “It would be better had you not taken it upon yourself to make a public announcement.”

“You want an apology for that?”

“I want you to start thinking first,” Ultra Magnus corrected and he rounded on Rodimus, forcing his captain to screech to a halt in the corridor. “Your inability to do so is what landed us in this predicament in this first place. I would also ask that you treat this situation with the gravity it deserves.”

Rodimus folded his arms. “You want me to mope around and worry the crew? How's that going to help us?”

Ultra Magnus ex-vented a burst of air and pinched his olfactory sensor. “I want you to stop

pretending this is some kind of game. You have a bomb strapped around your neck, Rodimus. Kindly don't forget that.”

“It is literally impossible for me to forget, Magnus.” Rodimus rolled his optics and looked away, his frame set with tension. He fidgeted and continued with, “And for what it's worth, I appreciate everything you're doing for me.”

He wouldn't meet Ultra Magnus' gaze. Only then did he detect the embarrassment and shame buried deep within Rodimus' field.

“You are welcome,” Ultra Magnus said, tone kinder than before. “You would also do well to thank Swerve. He has put himself at risk for you, too.”

Rodimus nodded. “I will.”

“Good.”

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So Whirl left eventually. But that was only so Rung could poke his helm in and smile nicely and speak in concerned tones and make sure that Swerve was all right. Which of course he was. Why wouldn't he be?

Rung congratulated him again on his engagement, patted his hand, and said he'd see Swerve later tonight at the party.

Then Rung was gone and Swerve had a few blissful moments of silence. He managed to get all of the chairs righted and most of the debris swept into neat and tidy piles.

Rodimus swung by. He strode into Swerve's bar, a smile on his lips, a bomb around his neck, and his hands planted on his hips.

“So we're still having no luck getting this thing removed,” he said as he looked around, taking in the destruction left behind. “I'm going to have to ask you to carry on this ruse a little while longer.”

Swerve cycled through a series of responses, none of them polite. Rodimus wasn't usually a stickler for formal addresses but still, several of these crossed the line. Not that Rodimus didn't deserve every last one of them.

“Sure,” Swerve said instead and planted a wide smile on his face. “I mean, I'm having so much fun already. No point in stopping the party now.”

Rodimus chuckled. “See? That's what I like about you, Swerve. You're such a team player.” He winked and clapped Swerve on the shoulder. “Also, can I just say, that you and Magnus make for an adorable couple.”

He batted Rodimus' hand away. Seriously? What was with the touching all of the sudden?

“A fake couple,” Swerve corrected.

“Yeah. I remember.” Rodimus held up his hands and then lowered them, giving Swerve an odd look. “Thanks for that, by the way. I'm kind of fond of my helm where it is.”

Swerve snorted and went back to sweeping debris into the dust pan. One of these days, he might invest in a cleaning drone to go with his serving drone.

“You're welcome,” he said. “I guess I like where your helm is, too.”

Rodimus chuckled and clapped his hands together. “Good, good. And everything is going well with Magnus? He's not being an aft, is he?”

Not as much as you are.

“No. We've worked it out. We have a plan.” Swerve picked up his dustpan and juggled his broom as well. “Is there something you need? Because if you're not going to help, you're kind of in the way.”

Did he sound annoyed? Maybe because he was. Barely a day had gone by and he was being bombarded with reminders of this fake relationship that was going to be the end of him. He was in way over his head and they'd barely begun.

Rodimus blinked. “Uhh, no. That was it.” He paused and leaned closer, lowering the volume of his vocals. “You need anything, let me know, okay?”

Was that a moment of selflessness? Color him surprised.

“Um, sure. Thanks. I'll keep that in mind.”

“You do that.” Rodimus leaned back with a wink and a smile. “Well, I'm off to lie about my new accessory and make sure Megatron isn't going to lead my crew astray. See you tonight.”

“Yeah. See you.”

Swerve watched Rodimus go. He replayed the whole conversation in his mind and still couldn't make heads or tails out of it.

Rodimus was fragging weird.

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Swerve's comm led him not to the bar as he would have expected but back to Swerve's habsuite. Ultra Magnus pinged for entry and waited patiently, planting an appropriate small smile on his face. The door opened and Swerve peered out, wary as though someone was lying in wait to pounce.

Ultra Magnus blinked. “Is everything all right?”

“Depends on what you mean by that.” Swerve visibly relaxed and stepped into the hallway. “I've been bombarded with people who want to know the details. Which, you know, is to be expected but it was more than a little unnerving. And Whirl! Primus, Whirl! Someone ought to put him on a leash or something.” His field flared with his aggravation, only for it to flatten and wisp away.

Ultra Magnus dipped his helm. “I apologize. You could have commed me. I could have provided

assistance.”

“Pssh. That would have made things worse.” Swerve's visor flickered. He waved a hand dismissively. “They wanted to know details. Way too many details. And he was being, well, he was being Whirl about it. But I can handle it. I'm an adult, right?”

“You are,” Magnus agreed though he couldn't quite shake his concern. Swerve was even more scattered than usual. “Are you ready for this event?”

Swerve grinned and reached up, patting him on the arm. “Course I am. We gotta do this, right? For Rodimus?”

He sounded eager, which was comforting, but Ultra Magnus couldn't help feeling there was something off about it. Swerve's smile was genuine and his field had evened out, but underneath it was a sense of agitation.

Hmm. Something to look into later. Right now, they had somewhere to be and couldn't afford to be late.

“For Rodimus,” Ultra Magnus agreed.

He reached down and rested his hand at the top of Swerve's back. It was on their list of acceptable public displays of affection and he did not miss the way Swerve leaned into his touch. He was a natural at this.

Still, it never hurt to ask for clarification.

“Is this all right?” Ultra Magnus asked.

“Fine.” Swerve beamed up at him, his visor flickering. He patted Ultra Magnus' hip, the furthest he could reach.

Were he Minimus, they would have been more adequately matched. But there was something to be said about having one's partner be smaller than oneself.

“Feel free to let me know should anything become unwelcome,” Ultra Magnus said and he guided Swerve toward the exit.

Time to get this show started.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Characters this chapter: Ultra Magnus, Swerve, Alien OCs

Rated K+ for this chapter

Still more Swerve sadness and another panic attack. And a chance taken.

Commission Gift Fic for nothumanafterall.

Mood Music: "Crush," Mandy Moore

It was meant to be a casual event. That did not make Swerve any more relaxed. Clearly, the Exelons did not understand the meaning of the term casual.

The bar and restaurant was three times larger than his own on the *Lost Light*. Almost every crew member from the ship was here and Exelons were everywhere. There were decorations as far as the optics could see in the forms of streamers and confetti and bright dancing lights. The bar was filled with music and laughter and was packed to the brim.

Swerve inched closer to Magnus, which both helped and worsened his anxiety. If he hadn't forced himself to memorize all the rules Magnus had given him, he would have promptly forgot them all.

Primus. He couldn't do this.

"Shall we find a table?" Ultra Magnus asked. His hand was a warm presence on Swerve's back. He was keenly aware of it.

"Sure," Swerve said. Because if they didn't sit down, he was going to fall down. His legs were wobbling.

He let Ultra Magnus lead him, which ended up being a complete circuit of the entire room, as though purposefully putting them on display. He finally chose an empty table near a window, out which they could see the whole city and the *Lost Light* in the distance. Ultra Magnus pulled out a chair for Swerve and then slid into his own right next to Swerve but closer to the window.

"I told Rodimus to be distracting," Ultra Magnus said in a low tone. He leaned in close to do so, his vocals resonating in Swerve's audial. The brush of heat from his ventilations seemed to ignite Swerve's sensory net. "It should help keep all but the nosiest from bothering us."

Swerve worked his intake. He fought off a shiver. "Well, that's a relief."

If there was one thing Rodimus excelled at, it was making a spectacle of himself. And he was already doing so. Swerve could see him on the other side of the room, holding court with a gathering of mecha and Exelons alike. He was laughing and gesturing, probably telling some fictional story.

Ultra Magnus slung an arm across the back of Swerve's chair, his fingers brushing Swerve's shoulder. The point of contact left a buzzing warmth in Swerve's haptic net.

“And what are we supposed to do?” Swerve asked, casting the hand a briefly nervous glance. He didn't mind Ultra Magnus touching him. He simply wasn't used to it.

“Show everyone how madly in love we are,” Ultra Magnus said with a straight face.

Right. Should be easy.

And well, whether or not it was depended on who you asked. Small talk was easy. Swerve knew enough about Ultra Magnus' likes and dislikes to start a casual conversation about music. They chatted about topics like paint jobs and alt-mode top speeds and holomatter holograms.

Problems arose, however, when four Exelons stopped by to introduce themselves. The majority of them were government officials and Swerve had no clue on the proper protocol to talk with them. So he didn't. He kept his mouth shut, smiled when they seemed to make a joke, and gradually leaned closer and closer to Ultra Magnus.

A server came by to take their drink order and like an idiot, Swerve blurted out both his and Magnus' before Magnus could even speak. But their current visitor thought it was adorable and said as much.

Swerve blushed. Ultra Magnus responded with dignity, his hand brushing the back of Swerve's neck and Swerve tried not to melt into his chair.

“You clearly know a lot about each other,” the tax supervisor or whatever he claimed to be said. He'd introduced himself as Alexi and his multiple eyes darted between them. “A keen understanding is essential for a fully-functional, well-balanced relationship.”

“I agree,” Ultra Magnus said. “Communication is key.”

“Oh, yeah. We talk a lot,” Swerve said. He planted an enormous smile on his face. “About everything. No secrets between us.”

His hands fiddled in his lap. Did it make him look nervous or confident? He didn't know. The place settings in front of them were crooked. It had to be bothering Ultra Magnus. Was he pretending not to notice for the sake of the ruse?

Swerve reached out to correct them.

“That is good to hear,” Alexi said. “We believe strongly in the sanctity of a union. It is never something that should be undertaken lightly.”

“We agree,” Ultra Magnus said, his tone a bit tight. And small wonder. Did that lack of an official Autobot Code at the moment make this easier or harder for him?

The server returned with their drinks. Swerve accepted one and made to pass Ultra Magnus his, only to frown. Something looked off with the color. It wasn't right.

“I don't think the blend of this is correct,” Swerve said, peering closer at it. He gave it a tentative sniff and cringed. Yep. Way too sweet.

The server frowned and reached for it. “I'll have the bartender remix it.”

Swerve handed it back and then slid out of his chair. “No, that's okay. I'll do it myself. I know how

he likes it anyway.”

“That would be inappropriate, sir. I couldn't possibly--”

“No, it's fine.” Swerve waved a hand of dismissal as the server followed after him, all but bleeding distress. “You can go help someone else, I've got this.”

He paused, something occurring to him, and turned toward the table. “I'll be right back,” Swerve told Ultra Magnus.

This, at least, he could do. Making drinks? Was his thing. Polite conversation with the local officials? Was not.

Ultra Magnus cycled his optics. “All right,” he said, a touch of confusion in his vocals.

Satisfied, Swerve worked his way through the crowd to the large and fully-stocked bar on the other side of the room. Seriously, he was at once jealous of it. True they were serving a more varied clientele, but their engex selection far outstripped his own. They had additives and flavors he'd never heard of. Maybe he could convince them to send him home with some so he could experiment.

“Don't mind me,” Swerve said as he ducked under the hinged shelf and eased behind the bar. “Just gonna make a drink and I'll be out of your way.”

The bartender looked at him, blinking. “Um. Guests generally aren't allowed back here,” he said, multiple arms multitasking in a manner that Swerve envied. Did each arm have a mind of its own or something?

“It's okay. I'm a bartender,” Swerve assured him and he planted his hands on his hips. He stared up at the massive selection.

He knew exactly what he needed to make Magnus' drink, but he was itching to play with the other stuff he saw. How much would it cost to get his bar on the *Lost Light* this stocked? Did Mirage have some of these rarer ingredients? How did they taste?

“That's not really...” The bartender trailed off and then peered at him. “You're the one who's engaged, aren't you?”

Swerve's faceplate heated as he pulled down the ingredients he needed. “Yes.” He gazed across the bar where he could just barely make out Ultra Magnus through the press of customers. He was still deep in conversation with the locals.

“Thought so.” The bartender squinted at him, eyes flicking from Swerve's head to his feet as though measuring him. “Isn't he a little big for you?”

Swerve choked on a ventilation and then burst into laughter. “That's, um, that's not how it works.”

Would it be too-much-information if he said he liked the size? And that, technically, Ultra Magnus was two sizes? And that Swerve liked both of them? Or that he'd often imagined what it would be like to be with either of them?

“Ah, I see. I apologize.”

Swerve waved it off. “Nothing we hadn't heard before. Cybertronians come in all shapes and sizes which we've come to learn isn't really the universal standard.” Which to Swerve was pretty weird in itself. Then again, most of the species they'd encountered had been organic. He supposed that limited things.

Maybe he'd ask Perceptor about it. Not now. Or for the next two weeks. Or while Perceptor was trying to keep Rodimus' helm from exploding. But a topic for a later date.

Swerve finished mixing up Ultra Magnus' drink and held it up to the light, admiring it. Perfect color and a quick sniff confirmed it held the perfect scent, fresh and tart.

“Is that all you needed?” the bartender asked.

“It is. Thanks. Hope I didn't offend you.” Swerve closed up the bottles on everything he used and returned them to their proper place. “It's just that Ultra Magnus is very particular about what he drinks and it's a kind of point of pride for me.”

“Oh, no. You're fine.” The bartender smiled at him. “I think it's pretty adorable actually. Good luck with your wedding.”

“Thanks!”

Swerve returned the grin and ducked back out of the bar. Once again, he picked his way through the crowd, having to duck around Exelon and Cybertronian alike. Ultra Magnus was deep in conversation when Swerve returned, but he looked up as Swerve set the drink on the table and scooted it close to him.

“You didn't have to go through the trouble,” Ultra Magnus said as he accepted the drink and took a sip of it. Pleasure bloomed in his field, which made Swerve grin. “But thank you all the same. This is delicious.”

Swerve climbed back into his chair. “Anything for you, Mags.” He beamed. He meant it.

“You two are so adorable,” one of the Exelons sitting across from them said.

The ones present now were different than the ones who had been here earlier. But they were probably more of the same, people Swerve had no idea how to talk to.

“Thank you,” Swerve said.

“It is a relief to finally be public about our relationship,” Ultra Magnus said. His hand slipped from the back of the chair to Swerve's back. “The secrecy, while necessary, was beginning to wear.”

Swerve leaned back against Ultra Magnus' arm. He intended to soak up all the physical contact he could. He even dared reach up and pat Magnus' hand, an action within the list of acceptable public displays.

Part of Swerve wanted Ultra Magnus to put him back on his lap. Another part of Swerve was glad that Magnus didn't. It was as embarrassing as it was arousing and right now, he couldn't reconcile the two.

“How long?”

“A year,” Swerve answered. He gave Ultra Magnus a shy smile. “We spent some time in Hedonia, things got out of hand, and well, it gave me the opportunity to see another side of him. After that, I wanted to know more.”

“There was an... incident,” Ultra Magnus added with a small, embarrassed cough. “This journey has been nothing if not eventful.”

“I understand you've had many adventures. Is this the first time anyone of your crew will take part in a bonding?”

Swerve nodded. “Yes. Some of us have gotten pretty close over the months and there are a few of us already bonded. But this is the first official wedding.”

“You know, I'm quite curious,” one of the officials said. She leaned forward on the table, the elbows of her primary arms balanced against the edge. “What is a Cybertronian wedding like?”

“It is personal,” Ultra Magnus explained. “It is different for each couple. Some like grand, ostentatious affairs. Others like smaller, more intimate gatherings.”

“And you?” she asked.

Ultra Magnus tapped the back of Swerve's chair. “I'm letting Swerve handle the details. We like simple and elegant.”

“Very nice,” another Exelon said with a nod. “What is the ceremony like? Do you exchange vows? Make promises? What kind of traditions do you have?”

“There are many.” Ultra Magnus shifted his weight, adjusting the fall of his arm across the back of Swerve's chair. “Often they are based on a mech's city of origin.”

“I was forged in Ibex,” Swerve offered. “We weren't much for pretentious ceremonies there. Very basic. Wrote our own vows and stuff.”

He slid a glance toward Ultra Magnus but he had nothing further to offer. It was as if the details were of no interest to him.

“What about bonding?” Another Exelon asked. “I have heard that you Cybertronians share... what do you call them? Embers?”

“Sparks,” Swerve corrected. He patted his chestplate. “It's our, um, you organics call them souls. Our life force. And yeah, bonding usually means we touch sparks.”

“Isn't that dangerous?”

“It can be. But it's worth it.” Swerve looked at Ultra Magnus again, hoping for some agreement. For something.

Nothing.

The Exelon smiled. Swerve didn't know his name. He'd missed the arrival and introduction of these three.

“Do you have plans for after the wedding?” he asked as though he were full of questions. Seriously, Swerve felt a bit like they were being interrogated here. Which, come to think of it, was probably the point. “Will you continue on your quest or will you leave the ship?”

“Leave? Oh, no. We couldn't possibly do that. We've made a commitment,” Ultra Magnus said. He looked flabbergasted at the very thought of leaving. “The both of us.”

Swerve nodded when optics shifted their direction. “The quest is important. We started it together, we'll end it together.” He managed a smile.

Ultra Magnus inclined his head in agreement.

“But isn't it irresponsible?” the female Exelon asked. Her sharp fingernails rapped on the table top. “For the second in command to be bonded to someone aboard the ship? To have that kind of liability?”

“There are always risks,” Ultra Magnus replied. And then he didn't elaborate.

Swerve squirmed in his chair. Couldn't he have thought of a better, more romantic response? “We were at war for a long time,” he blurted out, capturing their attention. “And we decided we wanted to take that chance. Because, it's worth it, you know. Love is.” He touched Ultra Magnus' hand again, reassuring himself.

“How very true,” one of the males purred. His face lit up as he nudged the Exelon next to him. “And it's very romantic to think that way.”

The Exelon closest to the table leaned forward, something in her gaze cutting Swerve to his spark. “And children? Do your kind have such a thing?”

Swerve chuckled nervously. “Not in the traditional sense. Not like organics do.”

“Cybertronians are never children,” Ultra Magnus answered. He took a long sip of his engex. “There were only two methods to create new Cybertronian life and now both are lost to us.”

“That's very sad,” one of the males murmured.

Nods of agreement arose from the Exelons.

Not a whiff of sadness to be found from Ultra Magnus. Every answer had been given very matter of fact, stated as though he were reading from a list. It probably had been. The same relationship guideline that Ultra Magnus had given Swerve and was using to direct their actions.

Raucous laughter arose from the other side of the room. Swerve looked to see Rodimus performing some kind of odd dance. Or something. He was being an effective distraction, not that he attracted the attention of the Exelons currently interrogating Swerve and Ultra Magnus.

Brainstorm, too, was nearby, Swerve noticed. He was tucked away in a corner with two other Exelons, both the serious, studious type. Maybe more scientists? Maybe Brainstorm was thinking ahead, getting them drunk enough to spill some information about the type of explosive they'd used on Rodimus' collar. Smart.

Swerve glanced around the room quickly, hoping to spy Tailgate or Rewind, maybe someone who he could convince to come over here and save him from this conversation. But, no. Cyclonus was unlikely to attend a party like this which meant Tailgate was likely to be with him. Rewind was probably too busy filming. Or maybe he and Chromedome opted for some alone time. They were still working out the particulars of their new and old relationship.

“We are confident that we will succeed in our quest, however,” Ultra Magnus said, drawing Swerve's attention back to the conversation at hand. “It is our hope that the Knights know of a means to help us repopulate.”

“Perhaps then you will be able to have children, or at least mentor the newly... born?” The Exelon sounded uncertain as he searched for the proper term.

“Forged,” Swerve corrected, but then he wasn't sure either. “Or constructed maybe?” He snuck a glance at Ultra Magnus, hoping for clarification.

“You would be better asking someone more familiar with the lore,” Ultra Magnus answered. He shifted his weight. “The idea of raising children doesn't appeal to me, but perhaps that is only because I have no experience with it.”

Swerve tried not to let his disappointment show. Granted, he'd never given much thought to children or mentoring before. It wasn't really something that came up. But Magnus' lack of enthusiasm was disappointing.

His lack of enthusiasm about everything was disappointing.

Swerve's shoulders slumped. It honestly seemed like Ultra Magnus wasn't as invested in this. Was he biased in thinking so? Did the Exelons wonder who was happier with the marriage? Were Ultra Magnus' reactions acceptable?

They weren't to Swerve. Bare minimum, that seemed to be the Ultra Magnus standard for his answers. There was no enthusiasm, no excitement. He might as well be talking about duty or something equally bland.

Duty. Maybe that's all it was. Duty and responsibility. It would never be anything more than that.

Swerve wrung his fingers together. His engine revved; his ventilations too rapid for his comfort. No. He had to keep himself together. He was being ridiculous.

“Swerve?”

Ultra Magnus' hand rested on his back. He leaned in toward him, face writ with concern. The bulk of his frame blocked out most of Swerve's view of the Exelons, but he did not miss how one of them subtly leaned closer, blatantly eavesdropping.

Swerve shook his helm. “It's nothing.” He tried to smile. It didn't work so well. It felt like his spark was breaking though he knew good and well it had no reason to.

This was all fake. He couldn't seem to convince himself of it.

Ultra Magnus frowned. He turned his attention back to the Exelons. “Would you excuse us, please?” he asked. “We need a moment.”

“Of course. Take what time you need.”

The Exelons watched them and Swerve couldn't decide if they were sympathetic or eager to see proof that all was not well between the engaged couple. No doubt the Exelons hoped to catch them in a lie.

Ultra Magnus rose to his pedes, his hand gentle as it shifted from the chair to Swerve's back. “Swerve?”

Miserable, Swerve slid from his chair. “I'm coming,” he mumbled.

It felt like everybody was watching as they skirted the edges of the room and headed for a side door. Magnus had to duck to get through it. His large hand remained at Swerve's back, warm and present, and his field betrayed nothing.

Swerve's anxieties doubled. He was screwing this up and everyone was going to know it was a ruse because he couldn't tell the difference between something that was real and that was fake.

Outside the bar, the hallway was quiet and private and that didn't make it any better. Swerve's fingers tangled together. His ventilations came faster and sharper.

Ultra Magnus knelt down, putting them on a more even keel, and that courtesy somehow made it better and worse. “What is wrong?” he asked. His concern even felt genuine.

That was unfair.

Swerve shoved his palm in front of his optical band. “Primus, you're going to think I'm an idiot or something.”

“I will not. If something has upset you, then let me know so that I can fix it.” Ultra Magnus reached for his other hand and Swerve let him take it. He let Magnus' thumb stroke across the palm of it, almost transfixed by the platonic motion. “Our circumstances are difficult enough without me causing you discomfort. Will you tell me what's wrong?”

Swerve released a shuddering ventilation. “Okay,” he said, but he refused to look at Ultra Magnus. He was too embarrassed. “When we talked about expectations and stuff, we talked about our engagement and everything, but we didn't talk about the wedding. Or after the wedding. Or... or what this really means in the long run. And this kind of thing is serious, you know, a wedding. But you act like you don't even care.”

It spilled out of him in a rush, a non-sensible blurt that was half-reality and half-pretend and was there a difference anymore? He'd let himself fall in deep and look where it had gotten him: alone in the hallway with Ultra Magnus while Swerve could barely string a coherent sentence together.

Ultra Magnus blinked. His fingers squeezed Swerve's hand. His field projected nothing but genuine concern.

“Of course I care,” Ultra Magnus replied. “I wouldn't have asked you to marry me if I didn't care.”

Swerve froze.

Of course.

Ultra Magnus was in character. He thought Swerve was in character, too. People were probably watching them, on camera or peering around corners. Swerve couldn't be real because he was playing a part. What was he thinking, actually getting invested in this?

"It's the public attention, isn't it?" Ultra Magnus, still soothing, still the perfect partner and Swerve's spark ached to hear it. "I know you don't like being under this much scrutiny, but we have less than two weeks."

Swerve's vents hitched. Two weeks.

"I want to marry you," Ultra Magnus continued, the epitome of a consoling partner. "Isn't that what matters?"

"Yes," Swerve cried. "It is."

He didn't have words to explain what he did next. Maybe it was the moment. Maybe it was his own emotions betraying him. Maybe it was that sweetly concerned look on Ultra Magnus' face, so close to his own.

Maybe it was the thought that he might not get another chance.

Swerve didn't know.

But it was a moment where all logic flew out the window. He closed the distance between he and Magnus, what little distance there was, and he kissed him. He pressed his lips to Magnus' in front of whoever happened to be watching, and he stole a kiss. It was what engaged partners were supposed to do, right?

Except they hadn't discussed this. They'd agreed to casual touching, to handholding, perhaps the occasional nuzzle. But not kissing. Swerve had taken what he'd not been given. No matter how sweet it was, it was wrong.

He broke off the kiss, guilt sweeping in to mingle with the agitation that had made itself home in his spark.

Ultra Magnus stared at him, lips slightly parted.

"I'm... I'm sorry," Swerve whispered, miserable to the core of his spark. "I shouldn't have done that."

Ultra Magnus' helm bowed a fraction. His fingers tightened and then relaxed around Swerve's hand.

"Let... um, let me go and I'll see myself to the brig," Swerve added, suddenly afraid of what Magnus might say. Of the disgust he might see in Magnus' optics.

"We have to stay," Ultra Magnus finally said, but his vocals were low, barely audible to anyone but the two of them. "It is part of the plan. And I cannot leave Rodimus in there without supervision."

"But--"

"We will discuss this later," Ultra Magnus interrupted, a bit more firmly. His field brushed Swerve's,

but it wasn't as full of rage as he would have expected. Instead there was surprise? Confusion? “For now we must return to the party. Will you be all right?”

Swerve forced a systems check and managed a wobbly smile. “Yeah,” he said. “This is all a game, right? I just have to play my part.”

Ultra Magnus gave him a long look, but he squeezed Swerve's hand and rose to his full height. “We both do.”

After all, it was only a game.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Mood Music: "I Won't Say I'm in Love," Hercules OST

It was going well up until the kiss. In fact, it was going so well Ultra Magnus couldn't help but marvel at how good of an actor Swerve was. He flawlessly glided into the role he'd been given. He played his part as though it were natural to him. He seamlessly notched himself into Ultra Magnus' life and if Ultra Magnus hadn't known better, he would have thought they really had been secretly dating the entire time.

Swerve was a marvel. He was so much better at this game than Ultra Magnus.

Admittedly, Ultra Magnus failed at being an actor. Minimus played at being Ultra Magnus for so long that it was second nature to him. He was Ultra Magnus. It was no longer an act. But pretending to be someone's promised? That was something he had no experience with. He struggled.

Swerve was a natural. Swerve was amazing. Ultra Magnus spent far too much time watching Swerve, missing out on what the Exelons were saying. They had to get his attention more than once and he'd had to sheepishly apologize. Especially when Swerve left to fix Ultra Magnus' drink properly.

He'd watched Swerve go with a sense of wonder. The Exelons had teased him about missing his promised, about them being unable to keep their eyes off each other. Ultra Magnus hadn't corrected them. He'd lied and agreed.

Swerve returned with a smile and a sense of pride as he presented Ultra Magnus with his perfectly blended engex. Magnus had been even more impressed.

Clearly, this ruse was going to succeed spectacularly. He might have stumbled into being attached to Swerve, but it was proving to have been an excellent coincidence.

Then there was the kiss, and Swerve looking at him with a flickering optical band, his field a chaotic mess of misery and disappointment and sadness. Ultra Magnus knew then that something deeper was going on. Something more than the awkwardness of this ruse.

He knew he'd have to get to the bottom of it.

But they couldn't abandon the party. Not with Rodimus getting increasingly intoxicated. Or with Whirl challenging one of the Exelons to a dart tournament. (And please let that not be another event that would allow him to become their King or their Head Medical Officer or something else ridiculous). Or with the Exelons trying to convince Siren to sing karaoke which was a good idea for no ear or audial present.

Ultra Magnus couldn't leave. But he could pay more attention to Swerve and notice things he hadn't noticed before.

Like how much Swerve really did seem to know about him. Or how shy Swerve could be when asked the direct questions. Or how charming he was. Or how amusing. When Ultra Magnus actually paid attention to his words, there was intelligence in there as well.

It was almost as if he was seeing Swerve for the first time. But whether this was the real Swerve or the acting Swerve, Ultra Magnus did not know. That observation was a bit of a cause for concern.

Maybe he was getting in too deep here. He wished he could have gone to Skids or Getaway for advice. Both Special Ops agents would have had some excellent advice he could have used. He and Swerve both, in fact. And he trusted they could keep a secret.

Well, he trusted Skids at any rate. He was still uncertain about Getaway. There was something about that mech that Ultra Magnus didn't quite like. Mirage was also an option, he considered, but the few who knew of the ruse, the better.

Sighing to himself, Magnus returned his attention to the conversation at hand and Swerve. Both bore watching.

Swerve's field was all over the place. Luckily, the Exelons could neither sense nor read it, but any passing Cybertronian would know his emotional state in a second. Swerve was a dizzying mix of excitement and dread and anticipation and sadness. None of it showed on his face as he'd planted a big, friendly smile upon his return and proceeded to charm and dazzle everyone around him.

He'd apologized for needing a moment, that all the glitz and glamour was overwhelming, and then dove helm first into his role. He sat close to Ultra Magnus, plating both warm and buzzing with energy. His visor was bright.

Ultra Magnus really needed to get him alone so they could talk. He'd meant his concern. The last thing he wanted to do was upset Swerve. This ruse was difficult enough.

But there was still business to be had.

"You're not unwell, I trust?" the Exelon who had introduced himself as Korex asked, his concern certainly feigned as he looked at Swerve.

Swerve managed a smile. "Not anymore." He looked up at Magnus, something in his visor warm. "Mags knows how to take care of me."

He patted Ultra Magnus' thigh and then left his hand there, a warm and barely tangible presence on Magnus' leg. It was on the list of acceptable personal contact, Swerve's hand closer to his knee than Magnus' pelvis. It was a smart move, an action considered intimate, that would cement their association to the curious and suspicious Exelons.

"It is my pleasure," Ultra Magnus said, returning Swerve's smile with one of his own. He rested his hand over the back of Swerve's chair again, his fingers brushing Swerve's opposite shoulder.

"You two truly are adorable. A perfect match," Oxiore said. Her smile was sharp, an edge of insincerity in her tone. She was one of the Grand Regent's assistants, surely sent as a spy for her mistress.

"Thank you," Ultra Magnus said. "We are very happy together." His thumb stroked the back of

Swerve's cowering, prompting a full frame shiver from the bartender.

"I can see that," another one of the Exelons said with a nod.

There was a shout from the other side of the room, interrupting whatever they had to say next. Ultra Magnus' helm swung to the left to assess the situation and nearly levitated out of his chair. He didn't care what or how, but there was no reason why the floor should suddenly be clearing to make room for Smokescreen and a warrior-type Exelon squaring off. Or for what appeared to be Jackpot on the side, taking bets with a gleeful look.

No. Absolutely not.

"Excuse me," he said. "There is something I must take care of."

And where was Rodimus? Nowhere to be found, of course. Magnus should not be surprised.

"I'll go with him," Swerve said behind Ultra Magnus, no doubt eager to escape the scrutiny of their company.

"What are they doing?" Swerve asked as he caught up to Magnus, whose large frame was easily clearing a path.

He ex-vented. "I do not know and I do not care. All I see is the potential for property damage."

Personal damage as well since the bar was still crowded despite the lateness of the evening. While the Exelons weren't much smaller than the average Cybertronian, they weren't made of metal. They were far more breakable.

And with their luck, the Exelons probably had some convoluted punishment lined up for people who caused property damage. What if beating an Exelon in combat meant Smokescreen would now be their head of banking?

Oh, Primus. This had to be stopped.

Ultra Magnus plowed through the crowd and didn't stop until he planted himself between Smokescreen and his Exelon challenger.

Both combatants protested. While Ultra Magnus had no authority over the Exelon, he could certainly order Smokescreen back to the ship. The gambler, swaying more than a little drunkenly on his feet, made a face but obeyed. So that no one could take his place, Ultra Magnus laid down a new rule quite loudly.

No challenging the Exelons. No fighting the Exelons. Or they would all be subject to discipline. Ultra Magnus backed himself up with a trademark glare.

No one argued.

It would not be the first ridiculous behavior he would find himself interrupting throughout the night. And while each instance was more irritating than the last, they all had the added benefit of being excellent distractions. The crew of the Lost Light were good at distracting without even trying. Thank Primus.

It also meant that Ultra Magnus spent little time cooped up in a booth with Swerve and several inquisitive Exelons. It helped that Swerve stayed by his side, offering advice or engex or coolant. He helped Ultra Magnus keep an optic out for trouble, and was the first to notice when Rodimus started dancing on the table.

It was late before they could escape, so late that it was almost morning on Exelon Five. Apparently, the locals took celebrations too a whole new level. No wonder Rodimus liked it here so much.

His necessary conversation with Swerve was even more delayed as Ultra Magnus had to make sure certain members of the crew would make it back to the Lost Light safely and without causing further incidents. Only when he was sure there were no crewmembers left who could cause issues could he turn his attention to Swerve, who had remained by his side the entire time, offering assistance where he could.

Swerve had actually been the one to drag a giggling, inebriated Tailgate back to his habsuite, where he deposited said tittering minibot into the arms of a very flabbergasted Cyclonus.

Back on the Lost Light, Ultra Magnus ex-vented relief and looked down at Swerve. "If you are not too tired, I believe that now is a good time for that talk."

Swerve offered him a nervous smile. "To your office then?"

Ultra Magnus shook his head. He frowned, though it was not directed at Swerve specifically.

"No. Our last meeting there prompted some lewd jokes that I bear little interest in repeating. They are also unacceptable. We will speak in my quarters unless that would make you uncomfortable."

It was ridiculous how quickly that particular rumor had spread. One evening spent discussing the situation with Swerve and by morning, Ultra Magnus had already heard the whispers. They followed him wherever he went. Skids even had the nerve to congratulate him and Magnus had been so flummoxed, he hadn't been able to come up with a proper retort in time.

How anyone had known that Swerve had been in his office, Ultra Magnus did not know. No one had seen them enter. No one had seen them leave. Which left the perpetrator as whoever had been on monitor duty.

Ultra Magnus made a mental note to check the duty logs to find whoever it was and slap them with an invasion of privacy citation.

"No. That's, um, that's fine." Swerve wrung his fingers together, his field that same mix of emotions that made Ultra Magnus' head ache. "Besides, it'll be good for our image, right? Anyone sees me going into your habsuite and they'll assume that we'll be doing things normal couples do in privacy together."

Normal couples. Swerve placed a certain emphasis on the term. Ultra Magnus did not fail to catch this and he took note of it. Perhaps within it was the route of the issue. Was Swerve having difficulty pretending? His behavior hadn't made it seem the case, but Ultra Magnus supposed he would get his answer soon enough.

He nodded. "You have a very good point." Ultra Magnus gestured down the hall. "Shall we?"

"Whatever you say, Mags." Swerve grinned, but the edges of his mouth quivered.

It wasn't fear, Ultra Magnus was sure of it. But something else. Uncertainty perhaps.

He did not object to the nickname, even though they were alone and Swerve had no reason to use it. Whatever eased Swerve's anxieties.

An awkward silence settled between them. Ultra Magnus tried to put Swerve at ease, but he was focusing too hard on discerning Swerve's discomfort. He had not wished to upset Swerve and clearly, he had. Magnus was disappointed in himself.

When they arrived, Ultra Magnus gestured Swerve in ahead of him. "Make yourself comfortable," he said. "Can I get you anything?"

Swerve squeezed his hands together and looked around the room. There wasn't much to see. Ultra Magnus had his desk, his berth, and a few chairs for when Rodimus often invited himself to visit. But unlike many habsuites, he had minimal decoration. Eventually, he hoped that would change. Now that the word was out about Minimus, perhaps he could be himself a bit more.

"No. Thank you. I'm good." Swerve pulled himself into one of the chairs and his hands settled in his lap, fingers once again tangling together.

Ultra Magnus selected his own chair, dragged it closer to Swerve's, and carefully seated himself upon it. He leaned back, out of Swerve's space for the metallurgist's comfort, and rested his hands on his thighs.

"Now," Ultra Magnus began as gently as he could manage. "Please tell me what is wrong."

Swerve dragged in a shuddering ventilation. He suddenly found the wall to be infinitely more fascinating than optical contact with Ultra Magnus. "It's ridiculous."

"It is obviously not if it is concerning you," Ultra Magnus said. He let his shoulders sag a little, his field drifting out in what he hoped was a comforting manner. "Swerve, you know I am not the sort to tease, taunt, or laugh. I only ask that you be honest with me."

He watched Swerve suck his bottom lip into his mouth and gnaw upon it. His faceplate colored a pale pink.

"This is hard," Swerve finally bit out.

Ultra Magnus blinked. "Given that you are excelling at this, I don't understand."

Swerve raked a hand over his helm. "That's only because I want it so much," he said, his gaze briefly swinging toward Ultra Magnus before it flitted back to the wall. His shoulders slumped. "It's just... I... you're good at this, too. Except for the part where you were pretty indifferent to the future. Which it's not your fault that I'm way more invested in this. It's just a game, right? A ruse to save Rodimus' life. Except it's kind of not staying a game for me. It's staying real."

Ultra Magnus tried to digest that spill of words. Swerve had spoken in such a rush that it took him a moment to pick through the language data. He felt he was coming to a conclusion, a worrisome one, and he didn't want to be wrong.

"You--"

“I forgot, okay?” Swerve blurted, his hands so wrung together that surely it was causing him pain. The chair rattled beneath him as he turned his gaze back toward Ultra Magnus. “You were being so nice and talking to me like I actually meant something, even when I was crying for no reason. And then I don’t even know what I was thinking except that I was kissing you because, you know, maybe you *do* like me like I like you.”

Yes.

There it was. The conclusion that he didn’t want to draw.

Ultra Magnus worked his intake. “You--”

“I panicked,” Swerve interrupted again and his field spiked, agitation greater than everything else. “I kissed you and I’m sorry. I’m really sorry for that Mags – Magnus – it won’t happen again.”

Ultra Magnus cycled a ventilation. He considered several responses to Swerve’s explanation and opted for seeking clarity on the most confusing part of it.

“*Like me like I like you?*” he repeated.

The heat in Swerve’s faceplate darkened to near-red. “I like you,” he admitted quietly. His gaze found the floor. “A lot. Before all this started. And that’s sorta making this whole thing very difficult and complicated because I’d gotten used to you not caring about me. But here you are pretending that you do and I can’t seem to remember that it’s not real.”

His field darkened, bleak and pained.

Swerve clenched his fingers together. “I know it’s all for Rodimus’ sake, and well, ours, too. Since the Exelons won’t be happy to know we’re involved in a fake relationship. But it’s still hard. I’m sorry.” He sighed and finally looked up. “I’ll adjust eventually. Don’t worry. I promise I’ll do better.”

This was not an eventuality Magnus had ever considered within the realm of possibility. He’d had no idea that Swerve liked him romantically. He’d thought Swerve barely tolerated him professionally. After all, how often had Magnus dragged him in for some violation of the Autobot code?

Ultra Magnus sat back in his chair, feeling more than a little overwhelmed and out of his depth. He had not prepared for this. It was too late. Swerve was involved, all of their sparks were on the line, and they couldn’t go back. They were all invested in this.

Magnus let out a slow ventilation. “I apologize, Swerve. I did not consider such an outcome. Had I known... well, I would have found a way around this.” It pained him, it honestly did, to know that he would be causing Swerve discomfort. “Is there anything I can do to make this easier for you?”

Swerve shook his helm. “No. What you’re doing is enough.” Embarrassment darkened his field. “I thought, well, I thought you already knew I had a crush on you. I figured you were being polite by ignoring it.”

“No, Swerve. Had I known I would have done my level best to try and avoid putting you in such an awkward situation.”

Of this, Magnus was certain. He could have found a way to replace Swerve. Convinced the Exelons

that their spies had heard wrong. That Swerve was covering up for someone else. That Ultra Magnus' "partner" had been taught to always claim he was single. That Swerve had been lying about having a significant other for any number of reasons.

Magnus could have arranged for a volunteer among the crowd of singles, perhaps spoken with Rung about who would be most amenable and capable. But Swerve had been willing. He'd been eager. He hadn't once said 'no.' Ultra Magnus felt terrible.

Rodimus owed them all greatly for this.

Ultra Magnus clasped his hands together and modulated his field to project soothing calm and comfort. "We have little choice but to continue. However, I do not wish to make you unhappy. Clearly, our current system isn't working. What would you suggest as an alteration to make it easier for both of us?"

Swerve's gaze fell again. He fidgeted on the chair. "What if we..." he trailed off, field shrinking inward.

"I am willing to consider all suggestions," Ultra Magnus urged.

Swerve's visor slowly lifted toward him. "What if we went full-time?"

Ultra Magnus tilted his helm. "I don't follow."

He was beginning to learn Swerve's tells, reading agitation as the metallurgist's fingers tangled together. "It's hard to flipflop back and forth. To switch between being your fiancé and just being me," Swerve said. He snuck a glance at Magnus and then found the wall behind Magnus fascinating. "So what if we just... didn't?"

"Didn't what?"

"Didn't flipflop." Swerve rolled his shoulders in a shrug. "What if we pretended all the time? Pretended that we really are dating. Make it real. Well, fake-real."

Ultra Magnus slanted a look at Swerve. What he was suggesting, well, it would only hurt Swerve in the long run, for all that it might make it easier on him now. What if by the end Swerve couldn't let go? What if Ultra Magnus had to break his spark?

"And you think that would be easier?" he asked, skeptical.

"I'm not saying it won't hurt," Swerve said. "Cause it will. But it's already hurting. And at least this way, it'll hurt less now and maybe later, too, because it'll feel like the end of a relationship. Like we gave it our best go, you know?" He offered a lop-sided grin.

Ultra Magnus cycled a ventilation. This didn't sound like the best solution to him, but if it would make Swerve more comfortable, he didn't want to argue. Oh, how he wished he could seek Rung's counsel on this. Somehow, he suspected that this course of action was not a good idea, only he couldn't articulate why.

"Very well." Ultra Magnus inclined his head. "If you feel it is the better course of action, I will accept."

Swerve's face all but lit up and Ultra Magnus wondered if maybe, this was a bad idea. They were only digging themselves deeper. But there was nothing to be done about it now. Best to make the most of a bad situation.

“However,” Ultra Magnus interjected, holding up his index finger. “I want you to promise there will be no more surprise kisses. I would prefer if we discuss these in advance. Agreed?”

Swerve's faceplate heated. He ducked his helm. “Agreed,” he murmured. “And I really am very sorry about that.”

“Apology accepted.” Ultra Magnus cycled a ventilation and lowered his hand. “Now, I suppose new rules must be instated. How would you define our relationship now that we are not 'flipflopping' as you put it.”

Swerve coughed into his hand. He looked as uncomfortable with this topic as Ultra Magnus felt.

“We could actually do things together? Other than whatever celebrations the Exelons have planned?” Swerve tentatively suggested. “Meet for energon? Come see each other for no reason? Share a, um, share a room? But not a berth!” His hands waved through the air, almost wildly. “I mean, I can sleep in a chair or something. It's just a thought.” Swerve shook his helm, face so bright that it glowed. “Never mind. Scratch the last suggestion. That's just too much.”

Ultra Magnus blinked. “Very well,” he conceded. “I am amenable to meeting for our daily rations. Certainly I can visit you while you are tending or cleaning your bar. You are more than welcome to stop by the bridge when I am present. Anything else?”

Swerve chuckled a little. “No, not that I can think of at the moment. Do you have any more rules for me? Anything you want me to do?” He sounded almost hopeful.

“No. You have been exemplary.” Which was the absolute truth. Though now that Ultra Magnus knew the reason behind it, his observations took on a whole new meaning.

He was at least relieved to get an answer and find a solution, even if it only made things more complicated.

In the meantime, Ultra Magnus made a mental note to contact Perceptor and Brainstorm, see if either of the two scientists had discovered anything new. Getting Rodimus free of that bomb was an utmost priority.

Ultra Magnus rose to his pedes. “Shall I escort you back to your room?”

“That would be the appropriate thing, I guess,” Swerve said. He slid from his chair and hesitated. He looked up at Ultra Magnus. “We're okay, right? I didn't weird you out?” Uncertainty slicked his plating down.

Ultra Magnus knelt on one knee. It brought him closer to Swerve's level and, he'd noticed, it calmed Swerve down. He rested a hand on Swerve's shoulder, hoping that he was not being too forward.

“No matter what happens at the end of this, we are going to remain friends,” Ultra Magnus said. He meant it, too. “I am neither angry nor upset, simply disappointed with myself for having hurt you.”

“It's not your fault!” Swerve blurted. “I should have said something sooner.”

“Be that as it may, I will do my utmost best to prevent your pain in the future.” Ultra Magnus offered another smile, his field nudging lightly against Swerve's. “Despite this, I am glad, Swerve, that you are the one to undertake this task with me.”

Swerve's smile in return was perhaps one of the first truly genuine and pleased smiles he had seen Swerve offer so far. “Thanks, Mags,” he said. “I promise I won't let you down.”

“I know.” Ultra Magnus squeezed his shoulder again and rose to his full height, which admittedly loomed over Swerve. As Minimus, he supposed they would be better matched. “Now, my dear, shall I escort you to your room?” He offered a hand.

Swerve snorted a laugh and gripped his index finger. “That would be most kind of you, sir. Most kind.” His lips twitched with restrained laughter.

They shared an amused look and Ultra Magnus was relieved to see Swerve *finally* relax.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Swerve goes out on a limb and asks for a real date. Ultra Magnus gets whammied with a revelation. Cuteness ensues.

Chapter Notes

Characters this chapter: Ultra Magnus, Swerve, Chromedome/Rewind,
Rated K+ for this chapter
Commission Gift Fic for nothumanafterall.

Mood Music/Soundtrack - "Wrapped Up," Olly Murs

It could have gone a lot worse.

Of course, it could have been a lot better, but as he lay on his berth, preparing himself for the new cycle, Swerve realized it could have gone a lot worse, too. Ultra Magnus could have been horrified. He could have thrown Swerve in the brig. He could have yelled.

Instead, he'd proceeded to be the most kind and considerate anyone had ever been to Swerve. Which had pretty much sealed the deal for him. If he hadn't been crushing hard on Magnus before, he was certainly doing it now.

He'd always suspected that Ultra Magnus would make a good partner. Now he was experiencing the proof of it.

The next morning, Ultra Magnus showed up at his door without fail, ready to walk with Swerve to the refueling station to share breakfast. They had a short conversation, sitting and speaking together like any normal couple might before they went their separate ways. Ultra Magnus reported to the bridge; Swerve reported to any one of the various duties he was occasionally assigned.

When Ultra Magnus stopped by during his usual round, he always found the time to speak with Swerve, even if only to ask him how his day was going or if he needed anything.

Bots noticed. They commented, too. Swerve could barely do anything more than heat his faceplate and stammer and wish with all his spark that it was real.

After shift had them meeting for another meal, usually joined by whichever crewmates were off-shift and willing to talk. Those were always trying times because they tended to ask such incisive questions, but Magnus handled them like a professional and Swerve followed his lead.

They left with the sound of catcalls and teasing in their wake, but Ultra Magnus never seemed ruffled by them. His hand never moved from Swerve's back, a subtle touch that made it obvious they were

together. Swerve recharged with memories of the warmth of Magnus' hand.

And no, he didn't self-service to the thought of it. Not at all. Not once.

The pattern repeated the next day, with Swerve spending more time with Ultra Magnus than he ever thought possible. He loved it. He soaked up every moment he could get. It was like a dream come true, except for the anxious truth about what would happen in the future.

That night, there was another party. Either the Exelons were really big on celebrations, or they remained suspicious about the engagement. Swerve couldn't blame them. It was a scam and he knew it. But he really didn't need them finding out the truth.

Luckily, this particular party was more formal. Smaller with less invitees, all hand-picked by the Exelons. More officials and smirking males and females, all dressed in what Swerve was coming to learn was their high fashion, full of sparkles and bangles and tiny things they called sequins and rhinestones. The kind of stuff that Rodimus loved but pretty much everyone else thought was gaudy.

The Exelons invited Swerve and Ultra Magnus as the guests of honor, and let them pick a few of their crewmembers to attend. This boiled down to Rodimus, Rewind, Chromedome and Perceptor.

With the exception of Rodimus, all of the attendees were sure to be well-behaved and this would perhaps give Perceptor another chance to pick the minds of the Exelons. Word had it their Chief Scientist or whatever his official title, would be in attendance.

They only had two weeks, ten days as of now, to get the bomb off Rodimus and get the frag of Exelon Five before Ultra Magnus and Swerve had to marry for real or Rodimus' helm was going to be removed from his frame. There was no more time for dilly-dallying. This was serious business.

The second party was a rousing success, at least in Swerve's opinion. Much less agitated this time around, Swerve was able to relax and fully commit to his role. He remembered how to be charming and how to tell a joke. He leaned close to Ultra Magnus with perfect timing. He smiled at his fiancée. He tried to present the picture of two mechs in love. And he felt like he succeeded.

Afterward, Ultra Magnus once again escorted him back to his room. He pressed their forehelms together in lieu of a kiss and that was enough to send Swerve orbiting the *Lost Light* with happiness. He firmly pushed aside the niggling reminder that this wasn't real. For now, he was going to give this all he had. He was going to enjoy it while it lasted.

The next morning, Swerve felt brave enough to make a suggestion.

Ultra Magnus blinked at him over his energon. "A date?"

Currently, they were in one of the refueling rooms, sharing breakfast in plain sight of the rest of the crew. Magnus was due to go on shift soon and even Swerve had to report to a shift of his own. It was as good a time as any for a pleasant chat.

"Yeah." Swerve beamed and fiddled with his energon. "An actual date. Not something the Exelons have invited us to attend, but just the two of us going out together on our own accord. A date."

Ultra Magnus inclined his head, frame rumbling with thought. "It would benefit the situation," he mused aloud. "I don't see why not. Did you have something in mind?"

Swerve tried not to wriggle with glee. He passed it off with a nonchalant shrug. "Rewind mentioned a pretty good restaurant geared toward Cybertronians," he said. "And there's always the theater. Or the park. Or, I dunno, shopping." The last didn't really appeal to him, but if it interested Magnus, he was all for it.

"That all sounds acceptable to me. Would tonight suit?"

"Sure!" Swerve's spark skipped a beat. He rebooted his vocalizer and tried for a bit more composure. "I mean, so long as you're free."

"I am." Ultra Magnus nodded again and finished his energon. "I will come pick you up at the end of shift. Is that acceptable?" He stood, no doubt intending to depart for his shift. Punctuality was one of Magnus' biggest buttons.

Swerve grinned. "It is. See you then."

Ultra Magnus dipped his head. "Indeed."

He left Swerve at the table and Swerve watched him go, the smile still on his lips. Ultra Magnus cut such a dashing figure. He couldn't take his optical band off him.

Tonight they would have a date. Despite the awkwardness of the situation, Swerve couldn't help but feel lucky.

"I saw that."

Swerve blinked and craned his neck just as Rewind and Chromedome strode up, taking the empty chairs across from him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Rewind chuckled. Chromedome looked bored. Neither of them had energon. Swerve was willing to bet they'd just been lurking out of sight, eavesdropping and watching and probably recording, knowing Rewind. Chromedome probably didn't give two shanix about the whole thing, but Rewind could convince him to do anything.

"Of course you don't." Rewind leaned on the table, crossing his arms atop it. "You probably couldn't see the dopey look on your face."

Swerve buried his faceplate behind the remains of his breakfast. "No, I didn't." He was still smiling, too. He didn't care. Rewind could call him out on it. He was happy.

Rewind laughed. "You've got that same sappy look now. Doesn't he, Domey?"

Chromedome's visor lit in Swerve's direction. "We could show you the footage if you want. Irrefutable proof."

Irrefutable proof? Sometimes, it was obvious what Chromedome used to be. Swerve fought back a snicker.

"No, I'm good." Swerve lowered his energon. "You just wander over here to tease me?"

"Not just." Rewind tilted his helm. "A public date, hmm? I'm happy for you, Swerve. It's about time."

The heat returned to his faceplate, along with a dose of shame. He hated lying to his friends, but such was the price he'd paid.

"Thanks," he said and pushed to his pedes, trying not to fidget. "Um, I have to go. I'm due on shift now. Talk to you later?"

"Won't you be busy with Ultra Magnus?"

"Later, later." Swerve rolled his optics behind his visor. "We'll catch up. You, me, Tailgate, Skids, Rung, whoever we can get a hold of. Yeah?"

Rewind waved a hand of dismissal at him. "Sure thing. See you later."

Swerve escaped before either of them could question him further. Rewind was too perceptive and Chromedome the same. He didn't dare risk that they'd catch him in a lie or contradicting himself. And he didn't want to have to lie to them anymore than he had to.

Besides, he had to see about trying to get off shift early to stop by the washracks and maybe touch up his paint. His first date with Ultra Magnus! He had to look his best.

Even if it was fake, it felt real enough to him.

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He'd only taken this route a grand total of five times in the past three days, but somehow, his feet had already begun to memorize it. Waiting outside Swerve's habsuite had become commonplace to him, as did the door opening and him looking down into Swerve's smiling face.

Something within Ultra Magnus gave a little flip, but it passed too quickly for him to identify it.

He had already placed reservations for the restaurant Swerve mentioned earlier. There was no time for dallying so Ultra Magnus hurried Swerve along with little touches to the metallurgist's back that left no room for confusion about whether or not they were together.

Swerve's field unfurled against his, warm with lingering traces of awkwardness. He babbled, a stream of words that said much without saying anything at all. Gossip, mostly. Observations he'd made. The lost holo-novel he'd read, which as it turned out, was one Minimus had read decades ago before he'd ever donned the Magnus Armor.

The restaurant itself was the perfect place for a date. Each table was a booth with high walls, giving them the illusion of privacy, and each seat was adjustable. Which meant Swerve did not have to struggle to peer over the edge of it and Ultra Magnus did not have to feel as though he were looming over his partner. Beneath the table, his knees kept bumping against Swerve's feet however, prompting Swerve to chuckle and his faceplate to heat.

Amused himself, Ultra Magnus didn't even protest the scuffs to his paintwork. He could always get Rodimus to touch it up for him later.

The intimate atmosphere, the romantic lighting, the quiet and soft background, it was no surprise that Swerve was, at first, very nervous. Ultra Magnus already knew how Swerve felt about him and this was probably more than he was ready to do. Ultra Magnus was about to suggest a change in location, perhaps something more casual, when Swerve cracked his first genuine smile and some of the tension drained from his frame.

“This is a nice place,” he said, peering out the window. They had a wonderful view of a nearby park, one lit with variously colored lamps. They reminded Ultra Magnus of the Christmas lights from Earth. “I’m glad we could come here.”

“As am I.” Ultra Magnus approved. The service was excellent, the atmosphere highly pleasant, and well, so was his company. “It would appear that Rewind does have good taste.”

Swerve chuckled, an unpracticed laugh that suited him far better than the ones he employed during one of their many 'shows.' “What are friends for, I guess. What about Rodimus?”

“I left him in the company of Perceptor and Brainstorm, the former of which assured me he would keep Rodimus out of trouble and the latter who felt confident enough to say that they wouldn't hurt Rodimus either.” Ultra Magnus paused and amended his words the same way Brainstorm had, “At least, in no manner that will leave scars.”

“Any luck on the, you know, the collar?” Swerve pointed to his own throat with a visible wince.

Ultra Magnus sighed. “I am afraid not. It is most alarming that it has stumped two of the most brilliant scientists I have ever had the pleasure of knowing.”

He had already thanked Primus that the Exelons never involved themselves in the Cybertronian war. Had they chosen a side, they could have easily swung the war in favor of whomsoever they chose.

“That's kind of scary,” Swerve admitted and then he fiddled with his fingers. “And disappointing. But, um, there's a tiny part of me that's not too much... And by that I mean, I'm just enjoying being with you and I'd be disappointed if it had to end, not that I want Rodimus to die or anything.”

“It's okay,” Ultra Magnus cut in with what he hoped was gentleness. “I understood what you meant.” And he did. Sometimes, Swerve said the wrong thing in his struggle to express himself. It was kind of adorable actually.

Swerve ducked his helm. “Thank you. That would be one of the few times that anyone.... well... just thank you.” He reached for the plate of assorted energon goodies that they were sharing, selecting one with a sweet filling. “Thanks for agreeing to this date, too. I know it helps our cause and everything, but you didn't have to.”

“No, I didn't,” Ultra Magnus agreed. “But I wanted to.”

Swerve's faceplate heated in that adorable way it did and he covered it up by shoving the goodie into his mouth.

That was when it occurred to Magnus.

This was an actual date.

The realization hit Ultra Magnus like a blow the faceplate, sending his thoughts reeling. Not only

was this an actual date, this was a date with Swerve. Perhaps not the last mech Magnus would have expected, but nowhere on his radar. Not that he was given to considering the crew around him as potential *conjunx* material, but if he had, he might have never noticed Swerve. Not in terms of romance.

Now he was paying attention, in a way he hadn't before.

He frowned to himself, remembering all the way back to the beginning. He remembered the look on Swerve's face when Ultra Magnus had first told him of the ruse. How excited the bartender had been and how his enthusiasm had faltered when Magnus explained that process of elimination had resulted in his choice of Swerve. He'd been disappointed, Ultra Magnus realized, but he'd covered it up gamely.

He'd been enthusiastic, willing to help. He still was, point of fact. He was sweet and accommodating. He offered suggestions and played his part to the fullest. He was willing to accept Ultra Magnus' rules and terms of conduct.

There was the incident of the kiss to take into consideration, but Swerve had apologized. He'd offered to accept punishment. He'd agreed to never to do so again and ask permission in the future. He hadn't mocked Ultra Magnus for desiring consent. Any physical contact between them was always carefully initiated, even when it lay within the boundaries of the rules Ultra Magnus had set. As if Swerve intended to always give him the opportunity to refuse.

Swerve didn't push or demand. He was charming and had a sense of humor. He had learned Ultra Magnus' little behavioral quirks and remembered them. There was no mockery in his acknowledgment of them either.

He... well, he cared. He cared even knowing who and what Ultra Magnus truly was. And that in itself was monumental. In return, Ultra Magnus felt a stirring of something, a pleased warmth that began in his internals and spread throughout his frame. It flooded all the way through to Minimus Ambus beneath.

Ultra Magnus looked at Swerve and saw more than a wise-cracking, rule-breaking bartender. He saw Swerve, and it was entirely possible, now that he'd taken time to consider it, that Magnus could return Swerve's feelings one day. It was no longer as ridiculous as it sounded. That revelation was mind-blowing.

"Magnus?"

He blinked out of his thoughts and noticed that Swerve was giving him a confused and concerned look.

"Are you okay?" Swerve asked.

Magnus managed a smile, his hand sliding across the table. His fingers touched Swerve's and Swerve turned his palm upward, giving Ultra Magnus the opportunity to tangle their fingers together.

"I apologize," Magnus said. "I simply realized something important." One finger stroked the inside of Swerve's wrist. "What were you saying?"

Swerve tilted his helm, suspicion flicking across his face, before he continued, launching back into some hilarious tale about a misunderstanding between Chromedome and Rewind that resulted in an

exchange of mismatched gifts. Ultra Magnus listened with half an audial, his focus turning inward, but his gaze resting on Swerve's animated retelling.

Yes, he realized. He could very well see himself falling for Swerve.

He couldn't mention such a thing now. That could potentially be detrimental to the ruse. He couldn't risk an actual romance in the middle of a pretend one. What if they argued? What if things became awkward? They couldn't afford to part ways. Neither could Rodimus. This ruse must be preserved. At all costs.

That didn't mean Ultra Magnus couldn't relent in his own way. Couldn't offer genuine responses to Swerve's behavior. He could allow for more contact between them and relax the boundaries. He could let Swerve take the lead. Ultra Magnus could even explore for himself what a relationship with Swerve would entail.

Once this was all said and done and Rodimus was safe and they'd fled from Exelon Five, Ultra Magnus could certainly approach Swerve and present his thoughts. Provided that Swerve's mind hadn't changed, Magnus could see them pursuing a true relationship.

Yes. That would do quite nicely. Thus decided, Magnus put a small, but genuine smile on his lips and devoted his full attention to Swerve's story.

Their hands, he noticed, were still linked on the table top. Magnus didn't mind.

They stayed at the restaurant until well into the evening. Magnus found himself unwilling to leave and Swerve never brought it up. They didn't make it to a walk in the park or a theater showing or any of the other entertainment options. They ate more than enough energon goodies and Cybertronian delights to make up for occupying the table.

They talked, mostly about inane things, but enough that Ultra Magnus realized he could carry a conversation with Swerve and not get bored or irritated. The more they talked, the more relaxed Swerve was. When a topic truly interested him, he lit up. His enthusiasm was a sight to behold.

He discovered that Swerve had a fondness for sweet treats and oilcake and he tended to lick his fingers to get them clean. Which worked in Ultra Magnus' favor as he preferred the tarter flavors and the rust sticks. It occurred to him once that true lovers might feed each other, but that seemed too forward so he set the thought aside.

He did, however, wonder if Swerve had considered it, too.

They didn't leave until their server politely coughed at them and reminded them that they would be closing soon. Swerve laughed and rubbed his head with embarrassment. Ultra Magnus apologized and left a substantial tip.

From there, they returned to the *Lost Light*, walking instead of transforming, their ex-vents leaving clouds of vapor in the chilly air.

Ultra Magnus walked Swerve back to his habsuite as had become their pattern now, and for the first time, felt a reluctance to leave Swerve alone. He considered many actions he could take and returned to the first that sprang to mind.

Swerve paused in front of his door, turning to look up at Ultra Magnus. The hesitation returned to his

field now, as though he wanted to ask something but was afraid of the answer.

His fingers twisted together in a show of uncertainty that Ultra Magnus couldn't help but find adorable. "That was great... right?" Swerve asked. "You had fun?" His visor gleamed with self-doubt, which all but broke Magnus' spark.

He would hope that Swerve was more comfortable in his presence now.

"It was very enjoyable," Ultra Magnus reassured and he lowered himself down to Swerve's level. This, too, had become part of the routine.

Indecision didn't often gnaw at Ultra Magnus. He was one to make a choice and follow through with it. Now he hesitated. Not only would this change things for himself, but also for Swerve. He could lie all he wanted and claim this was only for the sake of the ruse, but he knew better.

He knew that there was something more building. He simply didn't know how to classify it.

"I'm glad," Swerve said with a relieved ex-vent. His hands relaxed, fingers no longer forming knots. "We could do it again?"

"Yes." Ultra Magnus reached for Swerve's hand and was pleased when Swerve offered it. "I would very much like another date with you, Swerve."

The bartender's field bloomed against his, warm and filled with pleasure. His smile was both visible and palpable. "Me too!" he declared and then coughed into his free hand. "I mean, yes. That's great."

Adorable.

Ultra Magnus brushed his thumb over Swerve's palm. "Also, I wish to know. Do I have your permission to..."

Wait. No. Too formal. Too awkward. He didn't want it to come across as rehearsed.

Ultra Magnus rebooted his vocalizer and tried again, meeting Swerve's gaze with his own. Words were often the hardest part.

"Might I kiss you goodnight?" Ultra Magnus asked. His spark swelled with something akin to hope. Their first kiss had been a rushed affair that Magnus had not been prepared for and at the time, had not desired.

This time, he hoped, would be different.

Swerve's ventilations stuttered. His visor brightened, his mouth opening and closing. His field spiked with something that could only be called a resounding 'yes!' A visible shiver struck his plating.

"That, um, that would be fine," Swerve finally managed, faceplate heating behind his smile. "You have my permission."

Ultra Magnus smiled. "Thank you."

He leaned closer and noticed Swerve subtly tilting his helm as though offering Ultra Magnus his cheek, perhaps because he suspected that to be Magnus' original intention. No. If he was going to do

this, he was going to do it right.

He aimed for Swerve's lips, pressing what was probably a ridiculously chaste kiss to Swerve's mouth, but was all the more wonderful for it. Swerve's lips were trembling and they were warm, reflecting the heat in his faceplate. His hand squeezed Ultra Magnus', and his field burst with happiness. Any tension that might have been present seemed to flood out of Swerve in an instant.

When Magnus put an inch or so between them, his glossa swept over his lips and he swore that he tasted the sweets that Swerve had been consuming all night.

Magnus pressed their forehelms together. "Was that acceptable?" he asked.

Swerve's field lit up with joy. "Yes," he replied, and his other hand clasped at Magnus'. "More than. Thank you. That was, um, that was very nice. More than I could have hoped for."

"I am glad." Ultra Magnus leaned back, allowing Swerve some room to ventilate. "I will see you in the morning?"

"Yes. I'd like that." Swerve squeezed his hand and with visible reluctance, drew away. "Good night, Ultra Magnus."

"Good night, Swerve."

He waited until his fake fiance vanished into his habsuite before Ultra Magnus turned toward his own. There was a flutter in his spark, a warmth he couldn't have imagined. He wanted to name it his own flavor of joy but wondered if that was too soon.

This wasn't what he expected. Not in the slightest.

But, Ultra Magnus realized, neither was he opposed to it at all.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Swerve and Ultra Magnus are giddy and cute. Meanwhile, Rodimus shows up with another "problem."

Chapter Notes

Mood Music/Soundtrack - "I Want You," Savage Garden

His entire world turned on its axis.

Swerve lay on his berth for the second time in as many days, giddy to his very spark. Ultra Magnus had kissed him. Ultra Magnus had initiated said kiss. Ultra Magnus had agreed on another date.

It didn't matter that it was part of the role they had to play.

Ultra Magnus had kissed him. The thought echoed in Swerve's head, over and over and over again. He clutched his pillow and giggled to himself. It took him hours to slide into recharge and when he woke the next day, he was still bubbling with happiness.

Their routine continued.

Ultra Magnus was waiting for Swerve outside his door. They walked together to the refectory and shared their morning energon in public. Ultra Magnus left first, as always, and Swerve went to his own shift, feeling as though he were dancing up in the clouds or among the stars.

His shift partner, Rewind, seemed equally enthused. He was all but bouncing with glee.

"What has you so happy?" Swerve asked.

"Oh," Rewind said and tapped his camera. "Just a little something I saw last night." His visor lit up with amusement.

Swerve stared at him. Numerous things had happened yesterday. To which was Rewind referring? "Like what?" he asked, aiming for nonchalance. Though he suspected he failed spectacularly.

"Like a little interaction between you and Ultra Magnus and the adorable kiss that followed," Rewind said. He propped his chin on his hands and stared at Swerve, completely ignoring his work. "You two are sweeter than Domey's favorite energon snack."

Swerve felt his face color. He ducked his head. "Is that a compliment?"

"It's not an insult." Rewind chuckled. "I still wonder how come you never told us before. We'd have

been happy for you. And I've never seen you happier now."

The heat deepened. "Just... reasons," he said. "Part of them being Exhibit A, which is how much everyone keeps sticking their noses into our business. You know how everyone on this ship gossips."

"Including you," Rewind pointed out.

Swerve managed a grin. "Including me." He tapped the counter. "Now, come on. Don't we have work to do?"

"What is it they say about *conjunx* taking on the habits of each other?" Rewind asked as he dragged himself upright. "Because you certainly sounded like Ultra Magnus just then."

Swerve face turned scarlet. "Oh, hush."

Rewind cackled.

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Nothing had changed and yet the world felt like a different place. After leaving Swerve in the refectory, Ultra Magnus went to the bridge where an ill-looking Megatron informed him that he had command and Magnus could go explore the ship or something. Magnus didn't know what had offended the former Decepticon leader and was in no mood to ask, so he did as Megatron ordered and made himself scarce.

He ran into Rung first, the psychologist on his way to his office where no doubt his first patient waited for him. Ultra Magnus would have checked the schedule, but for privacy's sake, Rung didn't post it publicly.

"Good morning," Rung said with a brilliant smile. "You look to be in a fine mood today, Ultra Magnus."

Rung had been one of the few, after the Tyrest incident, to pull Ultra Magnus aside and ask him how he'd like to be addressed. Any misgivings Magnus had about Rung had been summarily abandoned after that consideration.

"I am. Thank you, Rung," he replied, tilting his head in greeting. "All is well, I trust?"

Rung nibbled on a handful of energon sticks. "No troubles as far as I can see. Everyone seems to be enjoying this little vacation. The Exelons are friendly."

To a certain extent, Ultra Magnus thought with a wince. "That is good to hear."

"Yes, it is. They are also excited about the upcoming nuptials." There was something sly in the look Rung slanted his direction.

Ultra Magnus coughed into his palm. "I admit that it probably came as a surprise to everyone."

Rung made a noncommittal noise. “You know, I am impressed,” he said, his tone quiet but ripe with meaning. “I had first thought it to be a crass joke among the crew when I heard you and Swerve were engaged. But given what I've observed, you two are very happy together.”

Ultra Magnus nodded. Rung was one of the few he expected would suss out the truth first. But since he hadn't, Magnus wasn't sure what to think. That he and Swerve were truly suited for each other?

“Thank you,” he said. “Swerve... makes me happy.” Part of him felt bad for lying to Rung, but a part of him also realized that it wasn't entirely untrue.

This past week's worth of pretense had left Ultra Magnus in higher spirits than he would have expected. He found himself enjoying the extra time he spent with Swerve, to the point where meeting Swerve for meals or comming him in the middle of the day was less because of the ruse and more because he wanted to.

“And there it is, my proof,” Rung said as they came to a stop in front of his office. He patted Ultra Magnus' arm. “That smile looks good on you.”

He was smiling?

Ultra Magnus cycled his optics and touched the corner of his mouth with his finger. Indeed he was. His faceplate burned a little at the realization. He was smiling whilst thinking about Swerve.

Rung chuckled. “As I said, I'm glad to see you so happy.”

Ultra Magnus inclined his helm. “As am I. Have a good day, Rung.”

“You as well.”

Rung vanished into his office, Ultra Magnus continued on his rounds. He managed, somehow, to smooth away the smile. But the next time he passed a reflective surface, there was no denying the friendlier cast to his face.

Perhaps he would comm Swerve after all.

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Swerve's comm chimed. He didn't bother to hide his smile when he recognized the sender either. “Excuse me,” he said loudly, turning his frame away from them all. “I have to take this.”

He ignored the playful teasing that followed and activated his communicator.

“What's up?” he asked.

Ultra Magnus' vocals came through the line and Swerve tried not to shiver. “Nothing dire,” he replied. “I simply wanted to talk to you.”

It's so close to “I wanted to hear your voice” that Swerve almost melted then and there. Ultra Magnus was far too good at this.

“Oh.” Swerve squirmed. “Well, I’m not doing much. Just a few earlybirds trying to catch the engex roboworm. You know, the usual crew.”

“I can imagine,” Ultra Magnus replied, humor rich in his tones. Swerve could just imagine him standing on the bridge, a slight curve to his lips that hinted of amusement. “And I am quite certain that if you turned around right now, they would all be watching you, and in Rewind’s case, recording.”

Swerve all but giggled. “You’d be right.” He paused to absently wipe at the counter, though he knew it was clean already. “You coming by the bar tonight?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for anything. We have a wedding to plan after all.”

“Yeah, we do.” Swerve’s spark did several flips of excitement. “I’m sure you have to get back to work so I guess I’ll see you later.”

Ultra Magnus made a noncommittal noise. “Blaster is staring so that is indeed the case. See you soon.”

The comm line clicked, indicating that Ultra Magnus had closed the connection. Swerve had to take a moment to get composed before he danced in place and made a fool of himself. It took all he had to turn back around calmly.

“Well, that’s taken care of, so does anyone need a refill?” he asked and he didn’t bother to hide the grin on his face. He was far too giddy.

“You,” Skids said, propping his chin on his knuckles, “are absolutely adorable like this, just thought I’d say so.”

There it was again, the heat in his face that he couldn’t hide. At this rate, the wiring might short out and he’d have to get First Aid to take a look at it. “Um. I’m... taken?”

Getaway laughed and nudged his best friend with an elbow. “Don’t think that’s what he meant, but Skids does have a point. You’re glowing, Swerve.”

“I am not!”

“You are,” Tailgate said. He leaned over the counter to grope beneath it, searching for the straw Swerve had neglected to get him. “But you know, I’m curious. Cyclonus is twice my size, but Ultra Magnus is like three times yours. How does that work?”

“Work?” Swerve repeated, his vocals faint.

Getaway all but giggled. “Well, when two mechs love each other...”

“Not what I meant!” Tailgate huffed and he kicked Getaway’s stool, only to wince as the dull thud echoed through the bar. “I’m just saying, Ultra Magnus is very large. How do they manage to ‘face without hurting each other?’”

Swerve fumbled Skids’ refill, barely catching himself from spilling it. “That’s,” he spluttered. The glass landed on the countertop with a dull thunk. “That’s none of anyone’s business.”

Especially since they hadn't and weren't ever going to and it was disappointing enough that Swerve would never get to know without them speculating. Besides. He had done quite enough theorizing on his own, thank you very much.

“Things stretch,” Skids said, tone thick with amusement. He braced one elbow on the counter. “Or didn't Cyclonus tell you that?”

It was Tailgate's turn to stammer as his optical band flared. “No one asked you!” he squeaked.

Swerve chuckled as Getaway threw an arm over Tailgate's shoulder and whispered something into his audial that made Tailgate's visor flash. More laughter rose from the group of mechs as the teasing turned from Swerve and Ultra Magnus, to Tailgate's long-standing crush on a seemingly oblivious Cyclonus.

Phew. Crisis averted.

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“There's a problem.”

Ultra Magnus came to a dead stop in the middle of the hallway, heedless to the fact he was holding up traffic. The last time Rodimus had called him with that tone of voice it was to say that he was about to be executed.

“What kind of problem?” Ultra Magnus demanded. Every hydraulic and line in his frame went tense. Even his spark clenched.

“The kind where your legal name isn't Ultra Magnus,” Rodimus said and he huffed over the comm line. Magnus imagined he was rolling his optics. “That's the name that's going to have to be on the paperwork we submit to the Exelons. They are demanding proof that you exist. The Minimus Ambus you.”

Ultra Magnus' mouth opened and closed. He pressed his palm to his face and pinched the crest of his forehead. “Proof,” he repeated. At least, he reasoned, it wasn't Rodimus calling to claim he'd committed another felony. Or done something else ill-advised.

“They want to see Minimus Ambus,” Rodimus clarified, and an edge of humor started to leak into his vocals. “Tonight. At the dance in your honor. That's not going to be an issue, is it? I know the Magnus Armor comes off.”

“It does. Not easily, but yes, it can.”

He simply didn't want to. Especially not around a group of lifeforms who were surprisingly well-armed for their organic nature. And who had already exhibited a willingness to execute an alien race for an honest mistake.

“Well, then there's no problem!” Rodimus all but chirped. “Especially since Perceptor thinks he might have found something. He said not to get too excited because he wants to run a bazillion tests

first, but Brainstorm seemed pretty optimistic.”

“One can only hope,” Ultra Magnus said and he cycled a ventilation. “I’ll leave the armor behind tonight. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a wedding to plan.”

He ended the comm before Rodimus could either laugh or tease him or say something inane that would only cause Magnus’ ire to double. He adored Rodimus, he truly did, but sometimes, his flame-painted captain was an irritant on the level of scraplets itching through his processor. Sometimes, it just didn’t pay to be the rational mind on a journey full of miscreants and juveniles.

No wonder Megatron was so irritated all the time. Surely he hadn’t had to put up with this nonsense as a Decepticon warlord.

Ultra Magnus shook his head and altered his course. Ratchet was gone, but First Aid was in the medbay and try as he might, Magnus would need help to remove the armor. After all, it was never meant to be so casually set aside.

Minimus was never meant to exist outside the armor.

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Ultra Magnus was busy. In comparison, Swerve was not. So most of the wedding preparation was left to him.

Luckily, or unluckily depending on who you asked, the Exelons were so intrigued by the concept of a Cybertronian marriage that they were being exceedingly helpful. They’d agreed to cater and all Swerve had to do was approve the menu, a hearty collection of Cybertronian treats and nibbles along with varieties of engex. They’d offered a team of interior designers who, upon Rodimus’ suggestion, decorated one of the meeting rooms for the auspicious occasion.

Swerve was half-afraid to look if Rodimus had been behind the design. No doubt it was bright and colorful and covered in flames and Rodimus faces.

There were no invitations to send because everyone was invited. That made things easier. Rodimus was going to preside over the ceremony. Rewind was going to record. Tailgate was to stand as witness for Swerve, and Megatron was to stand as witness for Ultra Magnus. Blaster was all set to provide music, though Swerve had been stern in what he considered acceptable songs. He wanted something appropriate for Ultra Magnus’ tastes, not the crew at large.

Not that it mattered, Swerve realized on glum occasion. They weren’t getting married for real. It was all part of the ruse. If all went well, they’d never even have to make use of all these preparations. But that didn’t mean said preparations didn’t need to be made.

It was a touch disheartening, but Swerve powered through it.

He made arrangements for the reception as well, where the snacks would be served. There would be music and dancing, the latter of which Swerve ruminated on with longing. He’d danced before, by himself, in the privacy of his habsuite. But never in public and never with a partner. It was one of his lifelong fantasies.

He wouldn't get to do that either.

Swerve sighed and got back to work, ignoring the look the Exelon gave him and the snicker Tailgate and Rewind shared. They probably thought he was thinking blissfully about Ultra Magnus. Which he was, but not for the reason they suspected.

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“So. How's it going?”

There was a Rodimus lounging on his desk. *Again.* Hadn't they already spoken once today?

Try as he might, Ultra Magnus could not ignore his errant captain, who looked perfectly relaxed despite the glaring explosive device strapped around his intake. Rodimus was also grinning, his spoiler wings twitching as though he held some juicy secret.

Ultra Magnus blinked at him, looking up from stacks of datawork he hadn't had time for as of late. “You'll have to be more specific in your query.”

Rodimus laughed. His smile doubled in size. “You. Swerve. A fake marriage that's looking oh so real.”

“That is of little importance. You should be more concerned about whether or not Perceptor and Brainstorm are going to figure the Exelon technology in time.”

Rodimus' field spiked, betraying the unease buried deep within it. He folded his arms across the edge of Ultra Magnus' desk and made a nuisance of himself. Typical behavior really.

“I worry about that endlessly, Mags. What I need is a distraction before I suffer a spark-attack. I trust my scientists. Right now, I wanna know about you and Swerve.”

Ultra Magnus let silence settle as he finished up his report, giving it his full attention. He registered that Rodimus was shifting with impatience and that Rodimus' grin was slowly fading away to a frown. But this needed to be done.

He didn't see fit to answer Rodimus' question until the final piece of punctuation had been added and he could save his work. Then he gave Rodimus his full attention.

“What do you wish to know?” He hoped it was not about the kiss. Not because Ultra Magnus regretted it, but because he knew Rodimus would make a deal out of it and Ultra Magnus wasn't that to examine the reasons why in depth.

Rodimus leaned back, tilting his helm. “You're getting along?”

“We're not arguing. Swerve is very amenable. We are surprisingly well-matched,” Ultra Magnus said.

“Mm-hm.” Rodimus' lips tilted back toward a smile. “He's a chatter box, but he's cute. Not my type,

but to each his own.”

“Type,” Ultra Magnus repeated. His optics narrowed at his captain. “You do realize that our relationship is only a farce, yes?”

Rodimus chuckled and folded his arms over his chestplate. “Relationships have had worse beginnings. You're seeing a side of Swerve he doesn't normally show now. And vice versa. For what it's worth, you two are adorable together.”

His gaze dropped to his desk and his array of datapads. These were safer. “He is a good companion,” Ultra Magnus admitted. “I am having more fun than I could have expected.”

“Noticed you meeting him for energon every morning.”

“It seemed like something two mechs in a genuine relationship would do,” Ultra Magnus retorted. It felt like Rodimus was fishing for something.

Rodimus sucked on his bottom lip. “Sure, sure,” he said, and pushed the chair into a tilt, rocking back and forth on it. “But you know, I was watching one day and I could have sworn I saw you smiling. Which, let me tell you, was adorable.”

Ultra Magnus sighed and pinched the bridge of his olfactory sensor. “Rodimus, what point are you getting at?”

“None really. Just stating some observations.” Rodimus' feet hit the ground and he rocketed to his feet with flair, per the usual. He braced a hand on the desk and leaned toward Ultra Magnus. “But you're busy so I'll leave. I just wanted to, you know, give you something to think about. Like what happens after we're free and clear of Exelon.”

“I don't know what you mean.”

Rodimus grinned and spun toward the door. “Of course you don't. It's just energon for your thoughts. Try not to get so wrapped up in your work that you forget.”

“I won't.” Ultra Magnus resisted the urge to roll his optics. It was undignified and tarnished the name of Ultra Magnus. He dragged his datapad stack closer, intending to return to work.

Rodimus chuckled. “I know you won't. Just a reminder, big guy. See you at the party.”

“Goodbye, Rodimus.”

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“You're blushing again.”

“I am not!” Swerve retorted. Just because his cheeks were heated did not mean he was blushing.

“You are!” Whirl cackled and leaned against the counter, clacking his pincers together. “Kinda cute when ya blush, too. Too bad Magnus snapped ya up already.”

Swerve rolled his optics. “You weren't interested before, Whirl. Don't pretend you are now.” His spark gave a little flip though. He'd spent so long being ignored that he wasn't sure what to do with all this sudden attention.

“Don't be so sure, motormouth. Maybe ya were just blind before.”

“Back off, Nutjob,” Tailgate said, literally hip-bumping Whirl to the side which was rather comical as it almost sent Whirl sprawling. “You're talking to a mech promised to another.”

Swerve chuckled. “I don't take him seriously, Tailgate.” He never had. He still doubted that Whirl was serious.

“That's not the point,” Tailgate said as he lifted his head. He climbed up onto the stool and propped his elbows on the counter. “Why are you still here anyway? Shouldn't you be getting ready for the party?”

“He's nervous,” Whirl offered from the floor.

“I'm not nervous,” Swerve shot back. “I have no reason to be nervous. Magnus is, well, Magnus is great. He's a lot friendlier than everyone gives him credit for. He listens when I talk to him. He's a great... um, I mean. He's just great.” The last thing he was going to do was talk about that kiss. He enjoyed it too much to share.

“Well, that sounds like a ringing endorsement,” Whirl said.

Tailgate shook his helm. “Ignore him, Swerve. He sounds jealous.” He propped his chin on his hands. “Go on. Tell us more about Ultra Magnus.”

“Not jealous!” Whirl announced and he dragged himself back to his feet. He climbed into the chair next to Tailgate. “Just confused. You kept it a secret a long time. I'm impressed.”

“Needs must.” Swerve shrugged. “Now seemed as good as any to tell everyone. At the rate this quest is going, well, no point in pretending, right?”

“That's terribly romantic,” Tailgate said.

Whirl made gagging noises.

Swerve ignored him. Tailgate was right. He did sound jealous. And Swerve couldn't even tell him that had no reason to be. That it was all false, despite Swerve's enthusiasm.

“Yeah,” Swerve agreed. “It is.”

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If anyone asked, he would refuse to admit he was nervous. Deep down, however, anxiety had left him gnawing on the inside of his mouth.

Removing the Magnus Armor was no easy task. In that moment, Minimus really missed Ratchet. The medic's skill would have come in handy. He'd gone to First Aid, but as friendly and helpful as the younger medic was, he wasn't familiar with the armor. It had still been a long, involved process.

He felt bare and exposed as the heavy outer came off, leaving him as Minimus Ambus. Not even pseudo-Minimus, but the irreducible version of himself. This size, he was even smaller than Swerve.

He didn't like the reminder that he wasn't Ultra Magnus. He didn't want to show up at Swerve's door looking like this. He didn't want to see the disappointment in Swerve's optical band.

It occurred to him that he'd gotten far too used to seeing Swerve excited to see him. He'd enjoyed Swerve's smiles. His soft laughs.

Ultra Magnus was a mech worth marrying. Minimus Ambus wasn't.

He stripped off the rest of the armor and left it in a careful stack. Then he was left with himself, a paint job that needed a good waxing, and a disappointed reflection.

He was not looking forward to this party at all.

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Swerve couldn't stop smiling. It was a mix of excitement and anxiety, all blending together and causing his tanks to flip and his hands to wring together.

Another party. Another chance to be close to Ultra Magnus. What wasn't there to be excited about?

“Keep still. I'm almost done,” Skids said.

“Thanks for helping me,” Swerve replied as he forced his frame to freeze. “Rewind offered but then Chromedome dragged him off and that's all he wrote.”

The buffing cloth rubbed across the top of his back, getting the last few streaks of stray wax. “Sure, kid. No problem. Gotta look your best for tonight, right?”

“Right.” Swerve managed a wavering smile. All he wanted was to not make a fool of himself.

“You'll do fine.” Skids patted him on the shoulder, his field thick with reassurance. “You'll have Magnus next to you anyway. I don't think there's a law he doesn't know.”

Swerve chuckled. “You're right about that. I don't have anything to worry about.” At least, nothing he could tell his friends.

Skids stepped back. “Okay. I think you're good. Smart and shiny. Magnus won't be able to keep his hands off you. Well, in private anyway.”

His face burned again. The kiss was amazing. He had high doubts – but also hopes – that it would ever go further than that. It wasn't in the agreement.

“I guess we'll see,” Swerve said.

One more party. More than a week down. They were speeding closer and closer to an actual wedding.

He just had to keep himself together.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Characters this chapter: Minimus Ambus, Swerve, Exelons, Rodimus

Rated K+ for this chapter

Swerve and Minimus go to the party and push the limits of their physical contact agreement.

Commission Gift Fic for nothumanafterall.

Mood Music/Soundtrack - "Dance With Me Tonight," Olly Murs

He waited outside Swerve's door, trying not to fidget, when it occurred to him that he probably should have warned Swerve that he'd be arriving as Minimus. That would have been the polite thing to do.

But then the door was sliding open and it was too late. Swerve blinked a tad bit down at him, surprise written into the initial flare of his energy field. Blessedly, however, there was no immediate disinterest.

"This is different," Swerve said before a grin immediately curved his lips. Some of the tension visibly erased from his frame. "Not that I mind or anything, but no armor?"

Minimus shook his head. "No. It came to the Exelon's attention that my legal name was Minimus. They want to see proof." He offered an arm to Swerve. At least at this height, it would be easier to walk together. "Hopefully, it's not too off-putting."

"Not at all." Swerve linked his arm with Minimus', their elbows interlocking. This close, it was all the more obvious that Swerve was slightly taller than him, but also made of more mass. "I like you no matter what form you take."

"I..." Minimus cycled his optics, his field flushing with surprise and warmth. That was not what he had expected Swerve to say. "Thank you."

"It's just the truth." Swerve shrugged and tilted his head toward the hallway. "Don't we have a party to get to?"

"That we do." Arm in arm, Minimus led them down the hall, his spark doing flips of joy at the casual comment Swerve had made.

I like you no matter what form you take.

He'd despaired of ever hearing those words. Once he'd donned the Magnus Armor, Minimus was supposed to have ceased to exist. No one cared about him before; what should it matter after? And yet here he was, Minimus Ambus, arm in arm with Swerve, on their way to a celebration in honor of their upcoming nuptials. It was both surreal and uncomfortable.

He was still not used to being himself, being Minimus. He couldn't shake the feeling that others were staring, Exelon and Cybertronian alike. He fought down the niggling worries, held his helm up high, and escorted Swerve to the event the Exelons had arranged. It didn't matter that Swerve was taller than him now. Minimus had grown fond of placing his hand on Swerve's back and Swerve seemed to enjoy it as well.

There were less present than Minimus would have expected. It wasn't as formal as the prior event, but not as casual as the first either. There was dim lighting and shining decorations. There were light refreshments, tiny selections of goodies and teasers and teensy vials of flavored engex.

He saw no few familiar faces, including Perceptor once more, chatting it up with a few Exelons. Hopefully, he was getting closer to understanding their technology. Hopefully, after tonight, they would have all the answers they needed to save Rodimus and get the frag off the planet and Minimus could sit down with Swerve and truly talk.

The meaning of the human phrase 'fingers crossed' came to mind.

What Minimus noticed most of all was the band and the rather large, open dance floor. One that Rodimus was taking full advantage of and gathering no few admirers. He freely danced with anyone who came sashaying his direction and suddenly Minimus understood the purpose behind the design of Rodimus' hips.

Music and dancing. Primus help them all.

Minimus knew how to dance. He'd been formally trained. He simply wasn't very good at it. Previous partners claimed he was too stiff. That he didn't know how to relax into the beat. And perhaps they were right.

He'd given up after that. And as for Ultra Magnus? Well, the armor wasn't meant to dance. Ultra Magnus wasn't meant to be fun. He was meant to be the stern, law-abiding Autobot who served as an example to everyone.

“Minimus!”

He startled at the sound of his name being shouted over the sound of conversation and music.

Rodimus noticed them as though he had some kind of homing beacon keyed in to his second in command. He abandoned his dance partner with an apologetic smile. He pushed through the crowd, bouncing their direction, and Minimus did not fail to notice that Swerve flinched a little.

It was hard not to flinch when that much charisma came bounding toward you. Rodimus was a force to be reckoned with.

“About time you got here,” Rodimus was saying as he skidded to a stop in front of them, clasping them each on a shoulder. “The Exelon dignitaries have been asking about you. I've been stalling them by showing off my rad dance moves.”

“I guess we should be grateful then,” Minimus drawled, but the sarcasm was lost on Rodimus.

The co-captain beamed at both of them like a proud caretaker. “Well, I am that good. Come on. Let's go.”

He circled around the couple and planted his hands on their shoulders once again, steering them toward one of the walls and a visible group of Exelons. Swerve tensed further and Minimus made it a point to rub his back. He tried to project calm into his field.

“Do we have to?” Swerve mock-whispered.

Minimus managed a tight smile. “Unfortunately so.” Luckily, he recognized most of the Exelons. They were the same faces that continued to snoop around Magnus and Swerve as though determined to sniff out the lie. “It is part of the game.”

Rodimus' hand's squeezed their shoulders as though reminding them to behave properly. As if Minimus needed the reminder.

“Ladies, Gentlemen, whatever your preferred address, I've brought the happy couple,” Rodimus declared with a broad gesture before he all but shoved Swerve and Minimus toward them. “You know Swerve, of course, but the shorter one here is Minimus Ambus, the mech behind the armor.”

“We are pleased to make your acquaintance,” one of the Exelons said, her accent thicker than all the others. “Is it common for Cybertronians to wear an outer shell?”

Minimus patted Swerve's back soothingly as Rodimus vanished, no doubt back into the crowd to dance to his spark's content. And hopefully continue to provide a distraction. So long as he wasn't here accidentally stamping on their traditions.

“No,” Minimus answered with a forced, pleasant smile. “My position was unique. I fulfilled a role that required me to wear the armor. I am a special case.”

“How intriguing.”

“You don't mind that he is essentially a lie?”

Well, that was a rather rude and pointed question. Minimus' optics cycled wider in surprise. He would not have expected such discourtesy from the Exelons. Perhaps they were getting desperate.

Swerve cycled his vocalizer. “Magnus and Minimus are the same to me,” he said, and he gave Minimus a nervous smile, his lips trembling but his optics honest. “I don't care what frame he takes.”

“That's very sweet,” the tax advisor – Minimus certainly remembered her – said. “If only others could think the same. It is important to accept others for who they are.”

Agreement flickered through her compatriots.

“Which form will you take for the wedding?” another asked.

Minimus exchanged a glance with Swerve.

“Whichever makes you more comfortable,” Swerve said with a smile. Yet another perfect answer.

“I am, at spark, Minimus Ambus,” he answered and leaned against Swerve, relieved as Swerve leaned back into him. It felt like support. “And that is who I want to be when I promise my spark to Swerve.”

Judging by the way the Exelons looked at each other, they approved.

"I am glad to hear it," one of the females said. "We are so happy to see that the Cybertronians have not completely lost their traditions during that terrible war."

Swerve nodded. "There are some things worth fighting for."

More agreement. More murmured talking among each other.

"It was nice to meet you, Minimus, but we won't keep you," another of the Exelons said. "We simply had to make sure that everything was in its proper place legally. You understand?"

"Of course." Minimus smiled and hoped it didn't show as strained as it felt. The question still stung, but Swerve's answer had eased it. "Swerve, would you like a drink?"

"Very much so."

Swerve turned away from the staring Exelons perhaps a bit more quickly than was polite, but Minimus did not blame him in the slightest. He dipped his helm in acknowledgment and apology and guided Swerve away. It was almost alarming how natural it felt to slide an arm behind Swerve and rest his hand at the base of Swerve's spinal strut.

"Well, that was terrible and not at all fun," Swerve said, vocals low enough not to be overheard, but audible to Minimus over the pulsing beat of the music.

"I suspect they are intelligent enough to realize that we were buying for time, and eager to catch us in a lie," Minimus replied. He planted a smile on his lips just in case they were still watching. "Let us make sure we give them nothing but a happy couple."

Swerve looked at him, a soft gleam in his visor. "Shouldn't be too hard. I enjoy being here with you."

Minimus' spark warmed. "You are a good companion as well," he said, and then audibly cleared his vocalizer, trying not to let himself get caught up in the moment.

Business, he had to remind himself. This was meant to be business.

He cast a gaze around the room. The dance floor took centerstage, but there were tables scattered all around the periphery. Servers floated through the crowd carrying trays loaded down with assorted drinks. Most of it was recognizable as engex but there were other things that he suspected were meant for the Exelons.

Minimus flagged down one such server and claimed a tiny drink for Swerve and himself, which they finished all too quickly. Minimus blamed it on anxiety. They both had it in spades.

There was a table in the corner, nice and private, so Minimus pressed a hand to Swerve's back and tried to guide him in that direction. They kept to the fringes, avoiding the crowd on the dance floor.

"Huh," Swerve said. Minimus noticed that his gaze seemed locked on the dancers. "They kind of have an interesting dance, don't they?" There was a longing in his vocals that Minimus could not ignore.

Swerve wanted to dance. And Minimus could not bear to hear the longing without wanting to rectify it. Minimus certainly could dance, only fearing the mockery. But he also knew that Swerve wouldn't be bothered by his skill or lack thereof. Swerve would be pleased that they were dancing regardless.

"They do," Minimus agreed, his palm rubbing a slow circle against Swerve's lower backplate.
"Would you care to dance?"

Swerve's gaze whipped toward him in visible surprise. "You would? With me? I mean, you would dance with me?" he stammered.

Minimus allowed his field to stroke along the furthest edge of Swerve's, letting him read the interest and authenticity in it. "I would. If you're so inclined."

"I am." Swerve grabbed his hand, squeezing it. "Right now?"

A new song was gearing up, one paced so as to be quick, but not enough to tangle his feet. Minimus felt it was appropriate for the situation.

"Unless you'd rather place an order first?"

Swerve's answer was to beam and pull him onto the dance floor. He took a spot that was relatively clear of other dancers, but didn't put them dead center. There were other dancers around them, enough to hide them in the crowd.

"I'm not really all that thirsty. Or hungry," he said.

Minimus managed to chuckle. He took Swerve's hand once they came to a rest, trying to get a feel for the beat. "Do you know any dances?"

Swerve's faceplate heated. "I was hoping you did." His helm ducked as though embarrassed. "I've never, um, danced with someone else before."

"Well, I have." Minimus pulled Swerve into the first slow turn, still matching the beat, but at half-speed. "And if you'll allow me to lead, I think we can both enjoy ourselves."

Swerve's hand squeezed his as he awkwardly tried to match Minimus' movements. "I have no problem with that," he murmured, his field pressing against Minimus', ripe with joy and nervousness. He probably feared making a mistake.

"Just remember to relax. It doesn't matter to me how good you are," Minimus said.

Some of the tension eased out of Swerve's movements. He smiled, frame moving better with the music.

It was pleasant. It was enjoyable. Swerve would misstep, grin sheepishly, and keep going. He didn't comment that Minimus moved stiffly or that he occasionally counted beats subvocally. He was simply content to share this dance. And then the one after that.

His face reflected his deep concentration and Minimus found it as charming as Swerve's smiles. Swerve's hands were warm, his field flush with joy.

One song became two and then three and then four, until Minimus couldn't remember exactly when

they started dancing, only that he didn't want to stop. He forgot that the crew and the locals were watching. All of his attention was given to Swerve. The bartender's hands were respectable on Minimus' frame, and the music seemed to have swallowed both of them.

Their frames were pressed together, heat to heat. He could both feel and hear Swerve's ventilations. He was thoroughly enmeshed in Swerve's field, for once devoid of anxiety. Swerve's visor was a dim, soft blue. His frame radiated heat.

He was quite handsome, Minimus realized, when there was no self-consciousness to hold him back.

And then Swerve looked right at Minimus, vocals wavering, and asked, "Would it... I mean... could I kiss you? Would you mind?" he asked. Or hoped rather. Just like with the dancing, Minimus could hear how much Swerve yearned.

It was in the asking. It was always the asking that made Minimus and Magnus melt. It made his spark flutter and his ventilations hitch. Mechs took so many things for granted these days, and that request for permission floored Minimus every time.

"It's fine if you're not okay with it," Swerve rushed to say, his gaze suddenly everywhere but on Minimus' face. "I know we only talked about the Ultra Magnus you. I'd just really like to kiss you right now, but I don't want to upset you."

Minimus' own face warmed. He tried to redirect the heat, but it was impossible. He was touched to the very core of his spark.

"Yes," he said, and his hand flexed on Swerve's lower back, encouraging the metallurgist closer to him. "Yes, you may."

Swerve's optical band lit up with joy and it reflected in his field. He licked his lips, a touch of nervousness wisping through his field. He murmured something, thank you perhaps and then his mouth pressed to Minimus. His lips trembled as they pressed briefly against Minimus' own.

The kiss was soft, warm, and a touch damp. His oral vents scented of sweet energon. It did not last long enough for Minimus' liking.

He chased Swerve's retreating lips with his own, offering a second kiss and then a third. The press of their lips together sent a shiver of want down his spinal strut, one he couldn't have expected. It was different and nice and he couldn't remember the last time he had genuine, intimate contact as Minimus. His entire frame tingled. His cooling fans engaged, and the first touch of Swerve's glossa to his sent a jolt down Minimus' spinal strut.

A small sound rose from his vocalizer, the distant relation of a moan, and that was what broke the spell. At once, Minimus remembered their circumstances. They were on the dance floor, in view of dozens of their fellow crewmates and the Exelons.

Somewhere along the way, they had stopped dancing.

Minimus withdrew from the kiss reluctantly, only to see Swerve grinning with pure joy. It was near impossible to keep a straight face.

"Your, um, your facial insignia tickles," Swerve said, face radiating a joyous heat. "It's cute."

Minimus' spark throbbed within his chassis. "We should..." He paused to reboot his vocalizer, an unnecessary amount of static coloring his vocals. "We should go back to our seats. I'm a bit underfueled."

Swerve leaned his forehelm against Minimus', his ex-vents a warm blast against Minimus' armor. "Okay," he said, almost breathy, like a soft submission. "Let's do that."

Minimus drew away, unwrapping his arms from Swerve's frame, though his entire being seemed to be vibrating. He took Swerve's hands in his and towed Swerve back to their quiet corner, staunchly ignoring the optics staring their direction. He tucked them into the back of the booth and never once let go of Swerve's hands. Their fingers were tangled together and he rather liked the contact.

A server came by, depositing another set of drinks for them, the same as they'd chosen earlier. Funny how Minimus didn't want to reach for them just yet, that he liked having Swerve's fingers wrapping around his own.

"That was nice," Swerve murmured as he nudged Minimus' drink closer to him. "Wasn't it?" His fingers squeezed Minimus'.

"Very nice," Minimus agreed, the near-memory of them dancing playing over and over at the back of his helm, along with the taste of their kiss. He wanted to tilt back in toward Swerve and repeat it.

"I didn't think I would enjoy dancing but you proved me wrong. Thank you."

Swerve beamed, frame leaning a bit closer, until they were pressed hip to hip, clasped hands between them. It was welcome contact, on their approved list, and Minimus reminded himself that it would be unacceptable to climb into Swerve's lap. Not only was it something they hadn't discussed, but for all Swerve knew, this was part of the act. He refused to mislead Swerve.

"I'm actually having fun," Swerve admitted in a quieter voice. "I didn't think I would, you know, considering. I pretty much hated the other events but this one..." He looked down at Minimus' hand, his thumb stroking over Minimus' palm. "I'm enjoying this one."

"I am as well," Minimus said, surprising himself by how much he meant it. "We make a good team."

Swerve's optical band caught his gaze, a genuine smile teasing his lips. "Yeah," he said, "We do."

Minimus' spark gave a little pang.

Oh, dear. He was in this deep.

"That was okay, right?" Swerve asked, his fingers flexing around Minimus' hand. "The kiss, I mean. I didn't--"

"It was fine," Minimus was quick to reassure. He could read the uncertainty in Swerve's field as surely as it was in his own. "It was more than I expected, but I think that's what I can call everything since we landed on this planet."

Swerve chuckled and leaned his head on Minimus' shoulder, also an acceptable contact. "Tell me about it." His free hand snagged his engex and he sucked it down. "Could we, um, could we dance again?"

Minimus looked at Swerve and for the life of him, the only thing he wanted to do was say yes. So he did.

“Of course,” Minimus murmured. He was quick to finish his own drink. “Whenever you want.”

Swerve's smile could have powered the *Lost Light* for a week.

Minimus wondered if his own expression was filled with equal joy.

They danced several more times, until the dance floor gradually cleared and their obligations were met.

It was late before Swerve and Minimus were free to leave the party. A few Cybertronians remained, but they were ones Minimus was certain could take care of themselves. Even Rodimus had already left, though he was sober as he'd done so, much to Minimus' relief.

That didn't stop a very inebriated Rewind from calling out to them as they passed. Chromedome tried to shush him, but was too late to prevent the words from coming out.

Minimus' audials burned.

Swerve's faceplate heated and turned his visor to a soft pink.

“Facing is all everyone's talking about,” Swerve moaned with embarrassment. He buried his face behind his unoccupied hand.

“To be fair, that is what most couples do,” Minimus replied.

Genuine couples, he meant. It was something not on their list of approved physical contact.

Otherwise, the walk back to the *Lost Light* was rather peaceful. Minimus felt warmed by all the engex he'd consumed – not enough to get overcharged but enough to leave a pleasant sensation in his tanks. Or maybe the warmth was because of Swerve, their hands currently linked together as they walked. It was innocent physical contact but Minimus was hyper aware of it.

So many decades spent in the Magnus Armor left him sensitive to dermal contact as Minimus. He swore that his hand tingled where Swerve gripped it, his larger, thicker fingers easily encompassing Minimus' own.

It was a beautiful evening. Exelon Five's atmosphere was so clear, the stars were bright and visible. It was something you easily forgot to appreciate when you were up there, searching for something that might or might not exist.

“I really did have fun,” Swerve said. “I didn't expect to. The other events were really uncomfortable but this one wasn't.”

“I didn't use to like dancing,” Minimus admitted. He squeezed Swerve's hand and looked at him. “But you didn't complain once.”

Swerve chuckled. “To be fair, I'm pretty sure I was worse than you.”

“Well, I don't know about that.”

They shared a laugh. Minimus enjoyed it. He hadn't laughed much. Never as Ultra Magnus and not lately. The *Lost Light* had been through too many close calls for him to remember what good times were like.

Swerve's door came into sight. This was where they always parted ways, but suddenly, Minimus was reluctant to do so. And truly, for the sake of the ruse, wasn't it better if they were seen at least going into a room together? To put better truth to rumor? Because he didn't want to let go of Swerve's hand and walk away and lose the good energy that seemed to be zinging through his lines.

"This is me," Swerve said as they stopped in front of his door.

Their hands remained clasped and Minimus reached for Swerve's other hand. He enjoyed the way their fingers knit together, the closeness of their frames. He liked how Swerve's field notched against his.

"A goodnight kiss would not be out of the question," Minimus murmured, glossa flicking over his lips unconsciously. "That is, if you are not against it."

"No!" Swerve's visor flared bright as he leaned toward Minimus. "I mean, no, I'm not against it. A goodnight kiss would be welcome." He tilted his face down.

Minimus' ventilations stuttered. He tilted up toward Swerve, their lips brushing briefly together before once again, it was not enough. He pressed harder, lingering in the sensation of the kiss. Swerve's lips were warm against his just as they were earlier and his field was eager and willing.

"That was... that was nice," Swerve said as they broke apart. "We should probably keep up the ruse, right? Want to, um, come inside?"

"Yes," Minimus breathed before his reasoning chip could offer a second opinion. "Yes, I do."

This was a bad idea. A terrible idea. This was good for the mission, but not for his peace of mind.

Yet Minimus voiced none of this as Swerve beamed and input his code into the panel, the door opening to admit them both.

This was such a bad idea.

But Minimus let Swerve take his hand and pull him inside.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Universe: IDW, MTMTE

Characters this chapter: Minimus Ambus/Swerve

Rated T for this chapter

The world shifts, feelings are realized, and this farce becomes a little more real for both of them.

Commission Gift Fic for nothumanafterall.

Mood Music/Soundtrack - "Accidentally in Love," Counting Crows

He was nervous. Swerve didn't know if he could pinpoint a time he had ever been this nervous. Minimus had asked to kiss him. Minimus had said yes when Swerve invited him inside.

Swerve was vibrating with excitement. He was sure his hands were shaking. He hoped Minimus wasn't paying any attention to the fact that his habsuite was messy. He hoped even more that Minimus hadn't said yes just so they could talk.

Swerve turned to face Minimus and was jolted by the sight of genuine affection in Minimus' optics. His faceplate was warm above his facial insignia, and his hand squeezed Swerve's own.

"Could I, um, could I...?" Swerve couldn't seem to get the words out, they were caught between embarrassment and fear. He wanted Minimus to agree as much as he dreaded that Minimus would let go of his hand.

Minimus seemed to already know what he meant, what he was asking for. Because his free hand cupped Swerve's face and he brought them together, nuzzling their forehelms.

"Yes," Minimus breathed, ex-vents warm and smelling of the sweet engex they'd had at the party. "Yes."

They kissed again and Swerve's internals turned to heat and mush. He wrapped an arm around Minimus' waist, trembling all the while. Their lips moved together, as though carefully treading dangerous ground. Their frames came flush, Minimus' heat against his own, and Swerve's cooling fans stuttered to life.

Swerve took a chance and tried for a taste, his glossa flitting against Minimus' lips. No protest emerged, only a soft moan. Minimus leaned against him, deepening the kiss. Swerve's spark pulsed with happiness.

He stumbled backward, and Minimus came with him, until his backplate hit the berth. Swerve's faceplate darkened at the implication, but he didn't want to presume. Whether they stood here and kissed or moved to the berth, it was all good.

Minimus' hands on his frame were more than he could ever asked for. They sent warm tingles of pleasure throughout his lines. Minimus tasted wonderful, his glossa slick and wet against Swerve's

own. His facial insignia tickled just like Swerve imagined it would, and he swore he could feel the pulse of Minimus' spark through their chestplates.

Swerve dragged his hands down Minimus' back, exploring the dips and ridges, finding all the places that made Minimus shudder against him. He heard a small moan from Minimus and a jolt of need struck Swerve hard and fast. He broke away from the kiss only to nibble along Minimus' jawline, leaving a string of kisses in his wake.

“Oh,” Minimus was saying, a little purring encouragement. “Mnnhhh.” His hands tightened on Swerve's armor, pulling their frames back together. The scrape-scrape of metal on metal was like music to Swerve's audials.

Swerve didn't wander away long. He returned to Minimus' mouth quickly, tracing Minimus' lips with his glossa and then returning back inside. He felt Minimus' heated ventilations, and moaned aloud as Minimus sucked on his glossa. He imagined that clever mouth on his spike or nibbling at his valve and Swerve's knees wobbled. Heat pooled in his array, and tingles shot through his housings.

Swerve wanted to hoist Minimus up onto the berth and continue this. He didn't care if Minimus splayed beneath him, allowing Swerve to blanket his frame in kisses and touches until Minimus came undone. Or if Minimus preferred to take charge and dictate what he wanted. Swerve had wanted this for so long, he'd take what he could get.

He tightened his hold on Minimus, rocking their frames together, his emotions spilling into both his field and the kiss. Pleasure lit up his sensor net in the wake of Minimus' wandering hands and the tiny noises of pleasure he made. His vocals were so different from Magnus', more a tenor than a bass, but Swerve loved them. They sent shivers down his spinal strut with every cultured word.

Swerve's hands wandered, one of them shaking as they slid down Minimus' back, approaching the curve of his aft. Minimus' plating was oh-so-warm to the touch, soft and smooth as if never dented or scraped. Swerve wanted to kiss him all over, lift him up and make him moan.

Minimus' hand smoothed down his sides, almost tickling, but for the press of his fingertips into Swerve's seams. Static spilled out from where he touched and Swerve shivered. His valve sent ready notices to his processor.

Swerve broke off the kiss to nuzzle against Minimus' face, heated vents escaping him. He opened his mouth to suggest the berth, to take this further, but Minimus beat him to it.

“I should... I should go,” Minimus whispered, his vocals lit with static and his faceplate flushed with heat.

Swerve wanted to whine his disappointment. He looked at Minimus, unable to hide his yearning. “You don't have to.”

“I know.” Minimus stroked the side of his face and Swerve's internals flooded with heat. His spike swelled within his housing, pushing hard at the cover. “But I should.”

Swerve nodded and unwrapped his arms from Minimus' frame, feeling the loss like a pang to his spark. “I understand,” he said.

Minimus withdrew from him, taking the heat of his frame and the pleasant sensation of his field with him. Minimus slid from Swerve's arms and Swerve followed him, his spark a pitter-patter within his

chassis.

They had already crossed so many boundaries. Swerve could hardly blame Minimus for leaving. They had discussed none of this. They had broken the rules set by Ultra Magnus. Though Swerve's entire frame was trembling, and he wanted nothing more than to return to the berth with Minimus in his arms, he wouldn't push it.

Minimus' decision to leave was probably the smartest thing either of them had done since he'd agreed to come into the room.

"I had a good time," Swerve offered, clasping his hands in front of him and hoping the yearning wasn't so obvious in his field. He didn't want to guilt Minimus into staying.

Minimus looked up at him, his optics a deep, deep blue. "As did I. Thank you, Swerve. This was..." He paused and rebooted his vocalizer. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

The door opened and Minimus stepped beyond it. He turned back toward Swerve, fidgeting and uncertain as Swerve had never seen Ultra Magnus before.

"Good night."

Swerve watched him walk down the hall. He tracked Minimus with his optics, all of those feelings he'd been careful to hide suddenly much stronger than before. He watched Minimus until he was out of sight, and only then did Swerve return to his room.

He was both elated and numb, so surprised by the night's events that a part of him was certain it was a dream. He stumbled toward his berth and climbed back into it. The scent of Minimus' polish was drawn in through his vents. He could still feel the smaller rumble of Minimus' engine against his own, along with the sleekness of Minimus' plating. He'd felt almost fragile to Swerve's hands, a fair difference from the heavy weight of the Magnus Armor.

It was like having two lovers in one.

Swerve groaned and dragged his pillow close, pulling it against his frame. He thought of Ultra Magnus bearing down on top of him, fragging him into the berth. He thought of Minimus cuddling up against him, a slow dance of their frames together, clever fingers diving into his seams.

He thought of coaxing a gentle smile from Ultra Magnus and recalled, again and again, the image captures of Minimus' laugh and his blush.

Swerve offlined his optics and buried his face into the berth. This was everything he wanted, and it wasn't real. He had to keep reminding himself that it wasn't real but it was so hard since Minimus had been here. Minimus had kissed him and touched him and revved his engine.

Swerve's panels clicked, lubricant pooled behind them, his spike surging to be free. He imagined how Minimus might touch him. Or Ultra Magnus. And those daydreams were almost painful because it couldn't happen. It wouldn't happen.

Oh, Primus. He was in deep. He was in way too deep. What the frag was he going to do?

It was difficult to think. Harder still to rub two thoughts together. Minimus knew it had nothing to do with the engex. He hadn't consumed nearly enough to impair rational thought.

He should not have done that. He should not have followed a random and wild urge and entered Swerve's habsuite. What was he thinking? Or had he been thinking?

Minimus did not know. It remained hard to focus. His fans were whirring. His spark was swelling. His frame was hot. He shook, his face flushed.

He remembered the feel of Swerve's plating against his fingertips. He recalled the gentle kisses, deep and hungry. A flush of heat seemed to coalesce in his pelvic array, tingling through his interface and sending requests to emerge.

Minimus had to deny them again and again. It was inappropriate. He should not have done that. No matter how much he wanted to – and that in itself was a surprise – he still should not have. It was a bad decision.

He returned to his quarters, which always felt too large without the Magnus Armor on. He glanced at the carefully arranged pile in the corner, but felt little urge to adorn them.

It had been Minimus whom Swerve had kissed. Minimus whom Swerve had invited into his room and touched so nicely.

Minimus wanted to be that mech a little while longer, a mech another had wanted.

He looked down at his own frame and saw streaks of dark blue intermingling with his green and white. Minimus' optics widened in surprise. He'd walked through the halls like this, with marks of Swerve all over his frame. He might as well have shouted to the *Lost Light* that he'd been up to some inappropriate behavior.

Minimus was ashamed that he'd been in such a state of disarray. But he felt oddly reluctant to wipe them away.

Swerve had been willing to touch him. Not Ultra Magnus, but Minimus Ambus. These paint streaks were proof positive.

Minimus stroked them with his fingertips, a tremble wracking his frame. Oh, Primus. How could he have let things get this far? This was only ever meant to be a ruse. It was not meant to be real.

Minimus powered down the lights and climbed into the berth, one far too large for him. It was sized for Ultra Magnus, not insignificant Minimus. It was empty. It didn't have the warmth of Swerve. There was a longing Minimus could not have expected, a need to return, to finish what they had started.

The heat gathering in his pelvic array supported that desire. Ultra Magnus, as the figure of command he was meant to be, was not prone to intimate relationships. It had been centuries since Minimus had been close to anyone. Now here was Swerve, eager and sweet, and it had taken strength Minimus didn't know he had to pull away. He had to remind himself that not only was it a bad idea, but he

was taking advantage of Swerve's affection for him, especially if he wasn't sure of his own feelings on the matter.

His own feelings...

Minimus curled on his side, tucking his arm under his helm. He stared at the wall, spark whirling frenetically and unable to be calmed.

He examined his own feelings on the matter. He did like Swerve. He enjoyed the time they spent together. He had grown an affection for Swerve, one beyond what was required for the benefits of the ruse. This opportunity had enabled him to see what was beyond the surface.

They could no longer continue the way they were. They were fooling the crew and Exelons as much as they were fooling themselves. If they continued this path, there could be consequences. Terrible ones. Not only for themselves, but for Rodimus and the crew.

Minimus could not ignore this. He and Swerve would need to talk. Not later, but now, before they fell too much deeper into this hole.

Steeling himself, Minimus activated his comm and pinged for Swerve. That he received an immediate answer did not surprise him. Swerve sounded eager, hopeful, and Minimus hated to have to crush his happiness.

"We need to talk," Minimus said quietly.

He all but heard Swerve squirm. "It's kind of late, Minimus," he hedged, and there was a desperation in his voice, as though he could avoid this discussion and save himself the pain. "We both have work to do tomorrow and--"

"Swerve," Minimus interrupted gently, understanding what bred Swerve's reluctance. This was something that needed to be done. "It cannot wait."

There was a long pause before Swerve replied, "I understand."

"I'll come to you," Minimus said as he slid off the berth. He made a vague effort to swipe at the paint streaks before deciding it would require more effort than he had time.

This discussion couldn't wait. Steeling himself, Minimus left his habsuite and returned to Swerve's. Thankfully, he did not run into anyone else. It was late enough that no one was wandering the hallways. The only witnesses were those on monitor duty. He pinged Swerve's door for entry and waited, hopefully not fidgeting.

Swerve opened the door and blinked at him. Confusion was etched into his field.

"Is something wrong?" Minimus asked.

Swerve shook his helm. "No. I just thought you'd be back as Ultra Magnus. It's fine. I'm just surprised. And relieved. Come on in." He gestured for Minimus to come inside.

It hadn't even occurred to Minimus to don the armor first.

He entered Swerve's habsuite and avoided the berth, despite how nice it would have been to climb

onto it with Swerve. He selected the chair from the desk Swerve didn't use and sat down in it. Swerve grabbed his own desk chair, giving Minimus a look that did little to hide the dread in his field.

Minimus cycled a ventilation and decided to just dive right in. "We didn't discuss this," he said and rubbed his hands down his thighs. "We should have discussed it but even I didn't expect things would come to this."

"Discussed what?" Swerve asked. He tilted his helm to the side, mouth upcurved in a faint, but very fake, grin.

Minimus had seen it before. He knew it enough by now to recognize when Swerve was lying to him.

He shook his helm, using his nearest-to-Magnus frown of disapproval. "Swerve, I know you know what I mean." He folded his hands together over his knees. "You always have the same look when you lie."

Swerve stared at him; Minimus stared right back. His spark cycled hard in his chest. He realized, in that moment, what his words truly meant. How much time had he spent watching Swerve to pick up on that? When did he start paying that much attention to Swerve? What did it even mean?

Minimus cycled a ventilation and rubbed a hand down his faceplate. He needed to get this conversation going in the right direction. "I am referring to the physical lines we crossed earlier this evening."

Swerve's visor cast toward the floor. "Oh," he said and his hands gripped his knees. "That."

"Yes." Minimus performed a systems check and decided there was nothing to do but be direct. "I wish to apologize for it. I should not have allowed things to progress as they did, especially knowing your feelings for me."

He was particularly ashamed of the last part. He should have known better. He should have been a better mech. It was proof-positive that he was Minimus and not Magnus because Ultra Magnus would not have countenanced such behavior.

"But I let myself get caught up in this ruse," Minimus continued, rebooting his vocalizer so as to clear the static from it. "I started seeing it as more than an artifice, as something that could potentially be real. It has let me see you in ways I never would have before. And I..."

He paused, letting himself trail off. His hands scrubbed down his thighs again and he was half-afraid to continue except that he felt he owed Swerve this much. He owed Swerve the truth.

"I find myself growing fond of you," Minimus added. He lifted his gaze, meeting Swerve's and seeing how very surprised the metallurgist was. "I want to spend more time with you. I am enjoying who I am with you and who you are with me. And I... I do not know what it means, save that I am happy to be with you."

He cycled a ventilation and glanced at Swerve, but the other mech had yet to say a word. His face betrayed nothing, though his field was a chaotic blend of emotion.

"Swerve?"

Swerve shook his head. "I heard you," he whispered. "I'm just trying to decide if I'm imagining this or not. Because I just.... I rebooted my audials twice and your words aren't changing."

Minimus tilted his helm. "Because I apologized?"

"No. Because you're saying... you're saying." Swerve cycled an unsteady ventilation and his fingers tangled together. "You're saying that you like me and I've only ever heard that in my dreams. I never thought it was possible. Now you're apologizing for kissing me and that's the last thing you should apologize for and I... well, I just don't know what to say."

Understanding dawned. "I meant what I said, Swerve," Minimus said. "This isn't a dream. I apologize for taking things as far as I did. Especially since we didn't discuss that ahead of time."

Swerve shook his helm. "You don't have to apologize for that. I want you to kiss me."

"Perhaps. But I did not know that. It is not right of me to change the terms without prior discussion," Minimus insisted. "To that end, I would like to discuss it now."

"Okay." Swerve cycled a ventilation. "Um, what do you want to know? Other than the obvious?"

Minimus managed a nervous chuckle. "Boundaries," he clarified. "What are they now?"

Swerve's face turned a dark red. "Um." His gaze found everything but Minimus' face interesting. "You can kiss me. And t-touch me. And... other things."

Other things was a distressingly vague term.

"I mean, like what happened earlier," Swerve continued, "that was fine. I liked that. I want it to happen again. That is, if you want it to," he was quick to add the last as though Minimus might yell at him for not including it.

"All right." Minimus nodded. "That seems fair. For your information, I am comfortable with the same. Interfacing, I believe, should be kept off the table. For now."

"R-right," Swerve stammered and coughed a ventilation. "Probably for the best. Because it's complicated."

There really was no better term. This was the epitome of complicated, and they still had Rodimus' fate to worry about.

Minimus cycled a ventilation. "For what it is worth, I still intend to seek permission for certain behaviors. I do not wish to take anything for granted."

"Whatever you say." Swerve's fingers tangled together until he released them and rubbed the back of his cowl. "I take it that means you aren't planning on spending the night."

"I don't think that's a good idea." Minimus shook his head. "Neither of us are ready for that step."

"All right." Swerve smiled but Minimus could read the disappointment in it. "I understand. So, uh, I guess that's goodnight then?"

"It is." Minimus pushed to his feet and headed for the door. Swerve trailed after him.

“W-Would a goodnight kiss be acceptable?” Swerve asked, his nervousness palpable. It felt like a buzz in his energy field.

Minimus turned and cupped a hand behind Swerve's head, pulling him in for a kiss, another meeting of their mouths and lips and glossa. It was scary how easy it was to kiss Swerve. Minimus wanted to fall into his arms, and take this further.

Minimus forced himself to break the kiss, briefly touch their foreheads, and leave. His spark swelled as he returned to his habsuite, still tingling, still warm. Less confused than the last time he'd left Swerve's, but equally elated.

This was whole new territory. It was as much exhilarating as it was terrifying.

0o0o0

What?

The words repeated over and over in Swerve's helm.

What? What was happening here? What was Minimus really saying? Did he mean it? Was it true?

He slid into recharge with his thoughts a muddled mess, his spark whirling and whirling, and uncertainty the strongest pull in his field. He did not know if he could believe what he heard, but he wanted to believe it. Minimus' confession left him in a daze that didn't quite settle home.

At least, not until the next day.

Ultra Magnus did not meet him at his door for morning energon. Swerve expected this because he knew Magnus had to take the bridge earlier than usual. So he wasn't disappointed.

He thought it might be nice, however, to be the one bringing Ultra Magnus energon for once. Not a full meal, but a little pick-me-up. It was, after all, something that couples did for each other.

Swerve gathered up energon and headed for the bridge, barely noticing who he passed. Some were whispering to each other, probably about him, but given his current state of fogginess, they didn't matter.

It wasn't until he walked onto the bridge and saw Minimus – wearing the Magnus Armor now – standing at the controls that Swerve's knees wobbled. He was as handsome as ever, and his words echoed in the back of Swerve's mind.

I have grown fond of you.

Realization struck like a lightning bolt to his sensor nexus. Swerve sucked in a ventilation, prompting a nearby Blaster to stare at him, but he ignored the look the communications mech gave him.

Swerve's grip around the energon tightened and he pinged Magnus' comm, attracting his attention. Ultra Magnus turned and only those watching him would have seen the twitch of his lips that

indicated pleasure. He said something to Hound and approached Swerve, dropping to one knee so that they could talk comfortably.

“This is unusual,” he said.

“Thought it might be nice for a change of pace,” Swerve replied, miraculously not stammering. He offered the cube to Magnus. “I brought this for you.”

“Thank you. I am a bit lower than usual today.” Ultra Magnus took it from him, and when their hands brushed, Swerve felt a jolt that traveled up the entirety of his arm and straight to his spark chamber.

His field spiked with joy before he could contain it.

“You're welcome,” Swerve said. He cycled a ventilation and looked Ultra Magnus right in the optic, pretending he was looking straight through the armor to Minimus beneath. “So,” he continued. “I like you.”

Ultra Magnus cycled his optics. “Yes. We've established that.” Confusion flickered through his field.

It was adorable. For once, Swerve was the one who actually understood what was going on.

“And you like me, too,” Swerve said, though his vocals were softer, so as to prevent the eavesdroppers from catching it.

Ultra Magnus tilted his head and Swerve picked up the moment that Magnus understood what he meant because he was treated to the sight of a genuine, soft Magnus smile. It lit up his energy field like lightning.

“Yes,” Ultra Magnus said, his field reaching for Swerve where his hands could not given their current location. “I do.”

Swerve grinned. His spark fluttered. His field probably turned florescent bright, giving all observers a sight they didn't deserve.

This was real. This was actually real. It made things more complicated because they truly couldn't afford to mess up. They couldn't argue. They couldn't break up. They couldn't be anything but a happy couple skipping merrily toward their wedding day.

But it was real. And it was more than anything Swerve could have ever asked for.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Characters this chapter: Ultra Magnus/Swerve, Rodimus, Perceptor, Brainstorm

Rated T for this chapter

Good news and bad news as the future races to an inevitable conclusion -- marriage.

Commission Gift Fic for nothumanafterall.

Mood Music/Soundtrack - "Secret Valentine," We the Kings

"We don't have a solution," Perceptor said as Brainstorm peered over his shoulder at the datapad in Perceptor's hands. "But we did discover a potential workaround."

Ultra Magnus frowned. Next to him, Rodimus all but vibrated with restrained glee. His hands kept rising to the collar around his intake before dropping to fold across his chest, or plant on his hips, or wave wildly through the air. Rodimus was not a mech who knew how to be still.

"We can't get it off," Brainstorm said, jumping in, much to the downturn of Perceptor's mouth. Perceptor's field dripped with exasperation. "At least, not with anything we have here. It's rigged too well. We fiddle with it and kaboom. There's no getting around that."

"We already know this," Ultra Magnus said. He ex-vented loudly, nearly blasting Rodimus with heat. "Why did you summon us if you have nothing new to report?"

"Because we do," Perceptor said. He twisted away from Brainstorm, targeting lens glinting in the overhead light. "We can remove it if we can deactivate the auto-destruct mechanism."

Rodimus bounced on his heel-struts. His spoiler fluttered. "You just said you can't do that."

"No," Brainstorm admitted, and his optics lit up as though he were grinning behind his mask. "But there are times, we've discovered, that it deactivates on his own. And when it does that, we can swoop in and--" He scissored two fingers on his right hand. "--snip, snip it right off and peel on out of here, saving Rodimus' helm and all of ours, too."

Ultra Magnus blinked.

Perceptor lowered his helm and pinched his olfactory sensor. His scope jiggered up and down. Perhaps too much time spent in Brainstorm's company had taken its toll.

"How did you discover this peculiarity?" Ultra Magnus asked. This was Rodimus' spark on the line after all. They couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

"Last night at the dance," Brainstorm offered with a peppy burst of his field. "I was scanning our captain here when he started dancing with one of the Exelons and noticed that the field he was giving off was suddenly gone."

"Subtle questioning informed me that Rodimus' partner was one of the royal line, the younger kin of

the Exelon he'd defeated in the race," Perceptor added. His fingers flicked across the datapad, pulling up something on the screen that he then turned toward Ultra Magnus.

It was a schematic. Ultra Magnus leaned forward, peering at it. He could not make heads or tails of the scientific jargon. He assumed it meant that Perceptor could save Rodimus.

"It makes sense," Brainstorm said, tapping his chin with two fingers. "They want the criminals to go boom, but don't want to accidentally kill anyone important. So it's programmed to deactivate if the criminal gets within a certain radius of any member of royalty."

"So I just need to get near a royal long enough for one of you to sneak up on me and take this off?" Rodimus asked, pointing toward the collar. He remained reluctant to touch it. "Let's do it then!"

"It is not as easy as it sounds, Captain," Ultra Magnus said. He fought back the urge to sigh. "Any event that would have the royals involved would be public. You would be the center of attention. It would be difficult to draw their gaze away."

Rodimus refused to be disappointed. "All we have to do is distract them. We need a bigger source of entertainment than me. Like..." He grinned, face lighting up, and Ultra Magnus got a sinking sensation in his tank. He snapped his fingers. "Like a wedding and a reception!"

Ultra Magnus shook his head, backtracking. "No, Rodimus. We are already perpetrating a ruse. You cannot seriously expect for us to go through with the wedding."

It was unfair to Swerve. It was unfair to Ultra Magnus. It was unfair to the relationship slowly building between them.

"We don't have to, Magnus. Don't worry." Rodimus patted him on the shoulder, an action Magnus had learned to tolerate. "These Exelons love to party. All we have to do is invite them to one of our own and *voila*, we have them right where we want them. No one knows how to throw a party quite like I do, right?"

"And on the off-chance that does not work, there is always the wedding and reception for a second opportunity," Perceptor said in a bland tone. He adjusted his targeting lens and flipped the datapad back toward him. "I'll leave the particulars of planning up to you. Brainstorm and I will decide the best means of removing the collar."

Brainstorm's wings fluttered, one of them nearly slapping Perceptor in the back. "Real quality time together," he said in a singsong voice.

Perceptor looked pained.

"Come on, Magnus." The back of Rodimus' hand slapped against his arm. "Let's go announce our party and with a little bit of luck, we can be off and away from Exelon in less than forty-eight hours, yes?"

This would speed up their initial timeline a little, but Ultra Magnus was fine with that. There were ways to explain it to the Exelons. He only hoped it worked.

Ultra Magnus cycled another ventilation. Rodimus' optics were bright and encouraged and just a shade desperate.

“Yes, Rodimus,” he agreed, mostly to soothe his captain's fears. After all, not even Rodimus could stay positive with a bomb around his throat. “So it would seem.”

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As it turned out, getting the Exelons to attend a party thrown in their honor and to celebrate the happy couple was not difficult. No sooner had Rodimus mentioned free food and dancing and celebration and half a dozen members of Exelon royalty had returned an RSVP. It was if they had nothing better to do than party the day away.

It was to be the last celebration before the wedding itself. It was their last chance to save Rodimus before going through with the ceremony.

“It's your turn to put on a show,” Rodimus said, but it wasn't with as much teasing as Ultra Magnus would have hoped. “You need to make sure they're paying attention to you. So you and Swerve need to be as obnoxiously sweet as possible.”

“A show,” Ultra Magnus repeated flatly. It felt like a bad taste in his mouth. The very idea of it was unpalatable.

It was no struggle to be with Swerve or spend time with him. He was not averse to touching Swerve or kissing him. He was simply averse to putting on a performance. He preferred for such things to remain private and special.

“It's okay. I believe in you.” Rodimus grinned and gave him two thumbs up. His field swelled with hope. He trusted that Ultra Magnus would do this and do this well.

He didn't really see where they had another option. Unless Ultra Magnus wanted to hire Whirl to provide a distraction. Which would work but might bring them more trouble. Whirl lacked a little something called tact and Magnus didn't need both Whirl and Rodimus in trouble.

Ultra Magnus sighed. He rubbed his forehead. Trust Rodimus to further complicate matters.

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“What?”

Swerve could scarcely believe his audials.

Ultra Magnus twitched, looking pained. “We need to be a distraction. We need to be something the Exelons want to watch so that no one sees Perceptor or Brainstorm trying to remove the collar.”

Swerve worked his intake and looked around the hallway. There was no one around to hear them having this conversation, but he still felt awkward. They stood just outside the newly dubbed “ballroom” on the *Lost Light*. Thumping music was audible through the walls and brightly colored lights flashed through the viewing windows. Almost the entire crew was in attendance and no few Exelons and now this?

“What, exactly, does that mean?” Swerve asked.

“I was hoping you could tell me,” Ultra Magnus admitted.

Scrap.

Swerve cycled a ventilation and rubbed his face with both hands. His spark was cycling faster and faster in his chest, images of things that would certainly work coming to mind. They made him simultaneously giddy and embarrassed.

“So basically we have to be the gooiest, sappiest pair of lovers anyone has ever seen,” Swerve said with a groan. Which, while he wasn't averse to being a little lovey-dovey, the kind of display Rodimus wanted would be nauseating. And, well, public. “I guess this is going to be the one time you follow my lead?”

Magnus managed a small smile. “I would welcome your instruction.”

Oh, Primus. Swerve's entire frame went flush with heat. This was not going to be easy. It would be a partial dream come true, and he couldn't even leave to take it to the next level.

He planted his hands on his hips and smiled up at Ultra Magnus. “At least we'll enjoy it. Mostly,” he said with a little laugh. “First things first. Escort me in like usual and then find a table in view of everyone. With a comfortable chair. Because I'm going to be, um, spending a lot of time in your lap.” He tried not to squirm.

“I trust your experience in this matter,” Ultra Magnus said and he straightened, sliding an arm around Swerve and placing a hand at the top of his back. “Are you ready?”

“No,” Swerve admitted but he patted Ultra Magnus' hip. “But let's go anyway. I'm with you, right? That's good enough for me.”

He was treated to a blindingly gorgeous Ultra Magnus smile, no matter how small it was, and then they were pushing through the doors and plunging into the madness that was a pre-wedding party in full bloom. It was loud and bright and Swerve almost cringed in the face of the noise of it. But Ultra Magnus was far more steady than him, and taller, so he instantly spotted a good place to put them on display.

Swerve tangled his fingers together. He was nervous. More than nervous. He had a hard enough time convincing himself it was okay to touch Ultra Magnus without having to do it in public, too.

Ultra Magnus picked a table and made himself comfortable. Swerve slid in the booth beside him and snuggled up to him. Proving that he was nothing if not adaptable, Ultra Magnus slung an arm over his shoulders, tucking him in against Magnus' side.

“Is this all right?” Magnus asked.

Swerve, with a trembling hand, lightly rested his hand over Magnus' abdominal armor. “More than,” he said. “This okay?”

“Just fine.” Ultra Magnus' finger stroked down the length of arm, leaving a buzzing warmth in its wake.

His frame curved toward Swerve as though shielding him from the party. It directed his ex-vents down on Swerve, putting his sole attention on Swerve.

“That works, too,” Swerve breathed. He nuzzled his helm against Ultra Magnus' plating, enjoying the radiating heat against his frame.

He felt Ultra Magnus' quiet chuckle as it vibrated through the armor. “Good to know. I'll order drinks for us.”

“You know what I like?” Swerve looked up at him, unable to hide his surprise.

“I've paid attention,” Ultra Magnus replied before he turned his attention to the server, indeed ordering one of Swerve's favorite drinks.

Wow. Swerve felt his faceplate heat. Ultra Magnus hadn't been pretending when he said the attraction went both ways. Mechs didn't bother to pay attention unless the details mattered to them.

The server left and Ultra Magnus looked down at Swerve. His free hand came around, thumb brushing something from Swerve's faceplate. It was both intimate and surprising and Swerve turned his helm into the touch, not bothering to keep himself from smiling.

“You're pretty good at this for someone who doesn't know what he's doing,” Swerve breathed. He turned his helm quickly and caught Ultra Magnus' thumb with his lips, giving it a brief kiss.

He was treated to the sight of Ultra Magnus shivering.

“It is easier than I thought it would be,” Magnus admitted, his optics gleaming at Swerve. “I have learned how enjoyable it is to touch you. It is only the public aspect that concerns me.”

“Yeah, that.” Swerve chanced a glance into the crowd and was both irritated and relieved to see that many of the Exelons were staring their direction. “Maybe pretend they aren't there?”

“I do not know if I have that much imagination, but I shall do my best to try.”

The server returned with their drinks, setting them on the table, but Swerve had no interest in the flavored fuel. He only had attention for Ultra Magnus.

“You'll do fine,” Swerve said. He believed it, too. Ultra Magnus seemed to have a knack for it.

He lay his hand over Ultra Magnus', keeping it pressed to his face. He loved how much larger it was, how it cupped the entire side of his face. Magnus smelled of fresh polish, too. He couldn't wait until he could lay on a berth, Magnus perched over him, his large hands stroking Swerve's frame.

Swerve shivered. “I love your hands,” he murmured, and then froze with embarrassment because he hadn't meant to say it aloud.

Magnus dipped his head closer, pressing their foreheads together, though he'd had to contort his frame to do so. “Thank you,” he said. “I am quite fond of your smile.”

Swerve chuckled. “Charmer.”

“I am only being honest.” Magnus' thumb stroked his cheek. “Perhaps we might be more comfortable if you sat in my lap?”

It would draw far more attention, too. Swerve hoped that wasn't Ultra Magnus' only aim.

Swerve grinned. "So long as you don't mind."

He shifted, climbing into Ultra Magnus' lap with Magnus' assistance. The size difference was immediately obvious. Swerve perched on one thigh, his legs propped over the other. Ultra Magnus' arm curved around him, keeping him tucked against Magnus' abdomen. It made it easier for Magnus to bend down and kiss him.

Swerve took advantage of this every chance he could. He loved the way Ultra Magnus kissed. He loved the feel of Magnus' ex-vents down on top of him. He loved the gentle weight of Magnus' hands on his frame.

Even better when Magnus reached for their engex and they were able to feed it to each other. Magnus held the cube to Swerve's lips like all the romantic vids Swerve had ever seen. When he spilled a little on his hand, Swerve was kind enough to clean it for him. Which sent his engine to thrumming with need.

He really, really wanted to take Magnus back to the privacy of their habsuites.

"I am glad that you do not mind me in this form," Ultra Magnus murmured, his vocals soft so as not to be overheard.

They kept their faces close together, a display of intimacy that would do well for the show they were putting on. But also, it was nice to sit here like this.

"I like both of you," Swerve said with a grin. "Both forms of you are good in their own way."

He loved the way Magnus' field went all fluttery anytime he said something like that. He would have never guessed that the great Ultra Magnus was insecure until now. It was adorable.

Occasionally, one of the Exelons would stop by to talk. They would comment on how cute he and Ultra Magnus were. They would offer luck and promise to be at the wedding the next day. Some even bought the happy couple drinks.

They had their fair share of commentary from the crew though. Whirl had cautioned them not to start fragging in public, which had prompted Swerve to blaze with heat and Ultra Magnus to glare at him. Whirl quickly skedaddled after that.

One point, they did catch sight of Rodimus, who gave them two thumbs up and a wink from across the room. Swerve spied Perceptor nearby and assumed Brainstorm was lurking somewhere, too. He hoped they succeeded.

But then his attention returned to Ultra Magnus. He much preferred the dizzying press of Magnus' lips to his, the quietly stolen kisses and the soft stroke of Magnus' hand down his back.

They shared quiet conversation, talking about nothing of importance, just little things that real couples discussed.

While they talked, Swerve liked to hold Ultra Magnus' hand. He would squeeze his fingers and stroke his thumb across Magnus' palm. He would lean down and press little kisses to Magnus' knuckles, too. He didn't fail to notice that with each press of his lips, Ultra Magnus would give a tiny shiver.

Every time Ultra Magnus leaned in toward him, Swerve felt a little thrill run through his frame. It still felt like a dream. It was hard to believe that he was sitting in Ultra Magnus' lap and Ultra Magnus was touching him.

He did his best to put their observers out of his mind. He pretended that no one was watching, that they were in their own private corner or habsuite. Because if he didn't, Swerve would be embarrassed beyond belief. It was like everyone was witness to his private fantasy, like he'd been caught self-servicing. He knew it had to be wearing on Ultra Magnus as well. He was so intensely private.

He really hoped this ruse worked. Swerve tried to find Rodimus again but couldn't see the co-captain through the press of the crowd. He was sure Rodimus was present, with Perceptor and Brainstorm both close close by. It didn't matter which of them removed the collar, it would be a matter of opportunity.

Swerve murmured a prayer, hoping they would succeed. The farce was wearing on him and he wanted to be able to be with Ultra Magnus freely. He wanted to see if what they had was real or a consequence of the ruse. He needed to know if Ultra Magnus was truly attracted to him, or if it was all a lie.

He needed this to work.

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Ultra Magnus only had to take one look at Rodimus to know that they had failed. That damnable collar was still around his neck and Rodimus' never-fail grin was losing its cheerful edge. He was no longer as bouncy as before either.

“On the plus side,” Rodimus said with a forced smile, “Perceptor now knows the exact sequence of events needed to remove the collar. So we can do it in the blink of an optic, provided a royal is near enough.” Rodimus' field was dull and lifeless, a sharp contrast to his usual exuberance.

Ultra Magnus pinched his olfactory sensor. “What went wrong?”

“They kept moving around,” Perceptor answered, sounding more frustrated than Ultra Magnus if that were at all possible. “It would have looked too suspicious if Rodimus had chased them around the room. Especially since they appeared to avoid him on principle.”

“I wonder why,” Ultra Magnus said, a more sarcastic retort than he intended but he was approaching the end of his patience. His head ached. “Fine. What can we do now?”

Perceptor cycled a ventilation. “Get Rodimus in a room within twenty feet of a royal and all I need is thirty seconds.”

“We cannot possibly arrange another party. The Exelons are expecting a wedding,” Ultra Magnus said through gritted denta. Dread began to drop into his tanks with heavy little thunks. “That's all we have left.”

“We don't have to actually go through with it,” Rodimus suggested. He planted a hand on his hip

and rubbed his chin with the other. “We could fake it. It's not like the Exelons know the proper ceremony for a *conjunx endura* vow.”

“Except that they've been chatting freely with the mechs on the *Lost Light* and we don't know exactly what they know,” Brainstorm said as he popped his helm into the room, giving no indication as to what he was doing just out of sight. “And if they think we're fooling them?”

“Boom,” Rodimus said and if it was possible for a mech to pale, Rodimus certainly did so. What was left of his cheer drained from his faceplate. It seemed the gravity of the situation was finally sinking home.

“No more Rodimus,” Brainstorm said. “And given the size of that explosive? No more anyone close to him. They won't wait until he's alone. It could take out a big chunk of the *Lost Light*.”

Ultra Magnus sighed harder. “I'll need to discuss this with Swerve. It is not fair to commit him to something without his approval.”

None of them had expected it would need to go this far. They'd all trusted in the skills of their scientific division, never imagining that the Exelon technology would prove to be beyond their grasp.

Rodimus nodded, cycling a ventilation. “I'll understand if neither of you are willing to go this far. It's a big step. I mean, I guess you could always take the ceremony of annulment afterward, right?”

Ultra Magnus grimaced.

The idea of such was abhorrent to him. It was like shouting his lie to the universe and though he was not the Duly Appointed Enforcer of the Tyrest Accord, he still felt obliged to live by just law. Playing in this farce – now uncomfortably real – was already stretching the limits of his flexibility.

“Yes,” he agreed. “If we must.”

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Swerve was expecting good news, so when he opened the door to a rather grimmer than usual Ultra Magnus face, his optimism sank.

“Still bombed?”

Ultra Magnus cycled a ventilation. “Unfortunately.”

Swerve gestured for Ultra Magnus to come into his habsuite. “What now?” he asked as Magnus came inside and then knelt down so that they they were on the same level.

He reached for Swerve's hand and Swerve gave it to him, letting Magnus draw him into an embrace. “Our only remaining option is to go through with the wedding. We cannot fit in another party. It will only be seen as a delay.” Ultra Magnus looked pained at the thought of the Exelon response.

“I see.” Swerve's spark hammered within his chest. He was almost afraid to know what this meant. “And?”

Magnus' other hand cupped his face, something which made Swerve's knees weak. "I had not previously considered being *conjux endura* with you. But I am not opposed to it. I would not consider it a burden nor an unfortunate fate."

Swerve's ventilations hitched. "Are you serious?"

Magnus nodded. "Yes. There are options, such as a negation ceremony later if we prove to have irreconcilable differences, but I would like to see where this takes us first. Unless you are opposed."

"No!" Swerve grinned. "I mean, no, I'm not opposed. I would like to try, too. See where this takes us. Make something of it. I'm willing to take this step with you. I mean, it's to save Rodimus, right?"

He desperately hoped that it wasn't the only reason. That the Ultra Magnus who was growing fond of Swerve was the same Ultra Magnus interested in pursuing a genuine relationship with Swerve.

Ultra Magnus' field rippled against his. "Yes. That is true. I would also like to think it can be a positive outcome for us as well." His thumb stroked Swerve's cheek. "And if at a later date, we feel this should be repeated as less of a farce, we can certainly do so."

Which meant Ultra Magnus had high hopes they might succeed as a couple. They could one day be legitimate even.

"Yeah." Swerve grinned. "I'd like that."

"Then I'll tell Rodimus the good news. After tomorrow, hopefully, we can all breathe a sigh of relief and be gone from Exelon Five for good," Ultra Magnus said.

He leaned forward, pressing their foreheads together. Swerve grinned and tilted his helm up for a kiss. Ultra Magnus obliged.

All things considered, things weren't too bad after all.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

In which Rodimus gives the performance of a lifetime while Swerve and Minimus Ambus take one for the team.

Chapter Notes

Characters this chapter: Ultra Magnus/Swerve, Rodimus, Megatron, Tailgate, Rewind, Lost Light Ensemble
Rated K+ for this chapter
Commission Gift Fic for nothumanafterall.

Mood Music/Soundtrack - "Marry You," Bruno Mars

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Minimus was glad that he'd left planning and preparation to someone else. While it would have served as a healthy distraction, he feared his current scattered thinking would have resulted in a mess. As it was, he could barely keep his thoughts in order. He was nervous.

Minimus was accustomed to being anxious at least. He longed for the Magnus Armor. He would have felt far more confident within the frame he'd worn for countless centuries. Ultra Magnus would not falter. He would not be anxious.

Minimus Ambus, however, could not stop pacing.

It didn't matter that he'd been polished and waxed to a sheen. He'd been given an updated paint job, courtesy of Rodimus, and had been pleasantly surprised that it hadn't been done with a flourish and flames and all manner of atrocious things. He gleamed in a tasteful way. He looked younger and more confident.

His spark, however, squirmed. He paced, something that seemed slow and measured, but inside, he was panicking.

Was this a mistake? He and Swerve had chosen to do this, but Minimus still worried. He'd agreed to give this a try, to make something out of their fake relationship. But what if his feelings were as false as their plot? What if in the end, he'd fallen for his own lie?

Minimus didn't want to hurt Swerve. He knew this much for certain. He cared for Swerve as a mech. He would never want to break Swerve's spark. But he was terrified of getting this wrong, of making a mistake.

But mostly, he feared that it wasn't a mistake. That he was taking this vow and it wasn't born of falsehood. That it was real, and Primus, Minimus did not want to lose this, lose Swerve. There was a

chance for happiness. All he had to do was reach out and take it.

Fear gripped his spark. Because he was Minimus, not Magnus, and Minimus was a coward. A Primal Vanguard wash-out worth nothing save for the loadbearer spark that gave him the gift of the Magnus Armor.

I like you no matter what form you take.

Minimus shook and hoped neither of his attendants noticed. Though it was almost laughable to call them attendants. While Ultra Magnus had few friends, Minimus Ambus had even less. So he was left with Rodimus and Megatron to serve as attendants and what that said about Minimus that the former leader of the Decepticons was his “mech of honor” for his commitment ceremony, Minimus didn't know.

“Are you all right?” Rodimus asked.

“Of course he's not all right,” Megatron cut in before Minimus could so much as open his mouth. Megatron snorted and leaned back in his chair, crossing an ankle over his knee. “Given this farce you've forced him into.”

“He volunteered,” Rodimus countered.

“You gave him little other choice,” Megatron retorted.

They glared at each other. Minimus sighed and pinched his olfactory sensor with a hand. Both mechs towered over him, but he suddenly felt the largest mech in the room. He was certainly the oldest and more mature. Neither of them were helping his anxiety.

“Gentlemechs, *please*,” Minimus said, palming his face. His spark wouldn't stop cycling and his limbs felt cold.

“Sorry, Minimus.” Rodimus, at least, sounded contrite. He tried to offer Minimus a smile. One hand touched the top of his chestplate within inches of the bomb, but never quite brushing it. “What do you need us to do?”

“Argue less for one,” he said and then gave them both a wan smile. “And tell me the plan is going to work.”

Rodimus thrust himself to his pedes and clasped Minimus by the shoulders. He looked down into Minimus' optics and said, with all the certainty Rodimus seemed to have in spades, “This is going to work. My spark depends on it.”

Minimus cycled a ventilation. “Thank you.”

“And if it doesn't, then none of us will ever have to worry again,” Megatron added in a dry tone.

Which didn't help matters at all. Thanks, Megatron. Thanks a lot.

Swerve had never been more nervous in his entire functioning.

He paced back and forth, wearing a path in the floor. He gleamed and sparkled like new. Between Tailgate and Rewind, they made certain that he looked amazing for his wedding day. He'd been polished and detailed until his armor gleamed and all the little details shone. He'd even been given a repaint and all of the scratches buffed out of his paint. And Swerve couldn't even tell them that it was only half-real.

His fingers twisted together. His ventilations came far too fast for his comfort. His processor kept spinning. He swore he was overheating.

In the distance, he could hear music. He knew that Exelon and Cybertronian alike were running around together, preparing the ballroom to house the ceremony. Tradition had demanded that Swerve and Minimus – no Magnus Armor for the wedding – would be separate until they met at the altar. That only made Swerve's anxieties double.

He was used to Ultra Magnus being there to answer his questions and to reassure him. All he had right now were Tailgate and Rewind and neither of them knew the truth.

Swerve paced back and forth, thoughts peppering inside his head faster than he could answer them.

He was getting married. To Ultra Magnus. To Minimus. For real. Or half-real anyway. It was part of a ruse, but it felt real to Swerve because they had made this decision together. They decided to do this for Rodimus.

But once the ruse was over, what then? What if Ultra Magnus figured out how much of a mistake he had made and decided to go through with the annulment ceremony? What if this was as much of a lie as Swerve feared it was?

What if he screwed it up? What if he scared Ultra Magnus away? What if he ended up alone again with only the failed echoes of a relationship in his dreams?

Swerve's panic intensified. His spark pulsed so fast it made him dizzy. His visor flared. He really thought he might lose consciousness here and now.

“This kind of nervousness is normal,” Rewind kept saying. “I remember when me and Domey were waiting to take our vows. We weren't separate like this, but Chromedome wouldn't stop pacing and my camcorder kept glitching. But in the end, it was perfect.” He gave a little sigh and Swerve could all but see the little sparks dancing over his head.

Tailgate clapped his hands together, his own visor burning with happiness. “It's very romantic,” he said. “I can't wait until it's my turn.”

Neither of them were helping.

Swerve looked at his chronometer. There was still some time left to go. He resumed pacing, fingers twisting and twisting together.

Please Primus let this work. Let them save Rodimus properly and get the frag off this planet. Let this be real. Let Ultra Magnus not regret it. Let Swerve be happy.

Please.

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He thought his nervousness would ease the moment the ceremony began, but it didn't. As more witnesses filed into the ballroom and filled the seats, Minimus' spark pulsed faster and faster. He peered through the doorway, watching the Exelons chat among themselves. The crew of the *Lost Light* were equally thrilled. It had been a long time since any of them had seen a commitment ceremony.

Rodimus was already waiting on the stage, shifting from pede to pede as time ticked closer toward start. Perceptor, Minimus knew, was nearby, on call for his opportunity. Hound was in the front row of the witnesses, holographic array prepped to provide cover for Perceptor.

It was all of their hopes that the Exelons would be paying attention to the happy couple and not Rodimus. Hound could cover Perceptor, but not for long, and the activation of the array would cause a brief, but noticeable ripple in the atmosphere. That second would be crucial.

Minimus worked his intake. His fuel tanks churned. This had to work.

His chronometer ticked forward. It chimed. It was time to start.

Minimus strode out from his hiding place, Megatron in tow to serve as his primary witness in the same way that Tailgate would be serving as Swerve's. Rewind had chosen to document the occasion.

Minimus was not unaccustomed to being the center of attention, but it felt odd to be so without the Magnus Armor attached to his frame. He felt very, very small and did his best to plant a smile on his face. After all, it was meant to be the happiest day of his life. He was being promised to another and receiving a promise in return.

Except he couldn't see Swerve.

His intended had not emerged from the staging area and Tailgate was nowhere in sight. Rewind was already in position, ready to record, but there was no sign of Swerve.

Minimus faltered, head sweeping to the left and right as he searched for signs of his intended. He heard the whispers pick up from the crowd of onlookers. Panic started to settle into his spark.

Had Swerve changed his mind? Had he decided he couldn't go through with this after all? What would the Exelons do if Swerve didn't show up?

The door opposite slid open just then. Tailgate stepped out, his faceplate lit up with happiness as he all but bounced on his pedes. Just behind him was Swerve and Minimus felt his ventilations hitch.

Swerve, like Minimus, had been polished and painted within an inch of his spark. He looked beautiful. His hands were shaking, Minimus could tell this from a distance. There was a shine to his visor that suggested his own nervousness, but he looked happy, too. He had a warm glow about him, and his field was tangible even across the distance.

He hadn't changed his mind after all.

Minimus couldn't stop staring at Swerve. His frame felt overly hot and he had to remind his cooling fans to cycle.

Swerve joined him on the stage and smiled. "Sorry," he whispered with a quick glance to their audience, "I stumbled and scratched my paint and Tailgate told me I couldn't go out like that even if it meant I was late."

Well, that was a relief.

Minimus reached for his hands. "I understand. This day is supposed to be perfect, right?"

"In every way," Swerve breathed.

Their hands touched and Minimus received his first taste of Swerve's field. It was indeed a bubbly burst of joy and affection. His thumbs swept over Minimus' palms. His hands squeezed tight, for all that they were shaking. His paint gleamed.

Just what had Minimus been afraid of?

A hush swept through the crowd. All eyes and optics were on them and Minimus couldn't be bothered to care. This felt real, for however long it lasted, and he was glad that chance had tipped the scales toward Swerve.

"Are you two ready?" Rodimus asked.

Minimus turned toward his captain and smiled. "I am."

"Me, too." Swerve squeezed Minimus' hands and grinned.

"Great!" Rodimus looked a whole lot happier suddenly as he clapped his hands together and rubbed his palms. "Then let's get this show on the road." He noisily rebooted his vocalizer and raised his hands. "Femmes and mechs and Cybertronians and Exelons, if I could have your attention please, this happy couple would like to begin their commitment ceremony."

The hush turned into silence. Somewhere, Minimus could hear soft music playing, a romantic little ditty without words. The tune was familiar though Minimus could not immediately place the title or composer. It added to the atmosphere of the moment.

Minimus and Swerve turned toward Rodimus. Minimus' left hand was clasped in Swerve's right as tradition dictated.

"Now," Rodimus said with a beaming smile, putting on a performance the likes of which none of them had ever seen. "Today is a celebration, my friends. A celebration of love, of commitment, of friendship and family, and two mechs who are in it for the long haul."

Minimus glanced at Swerve and caught his intended sneaking a glance at him as well. The corners of Swerve's mouth were curved with a smile and he was all but trembling. But it was the happiness in his field that spoke the loudest.

"Because despite our differences, love is what we all share," Rodimus continued, making grand

gestures with his hands now. He paced back and forth in front of Swerve and Minimus, performing for them as much he was for the audience. “It's the great unifier, a cosmic truth, *till all are one*, if you will.”

Minimus groaned and resisted the urge to facepalm. He knew Swerve must have felt the same. He wondered who'd won that bet, because surely the crew had been taking wagers on how long it would be before Rodimus spouted what was quickly becoming a catch-phrase.

A ripple of chuckling rose from the audience, but it was there and gone again and seriousness returned.

Rodimus grinned and tossed Minimus a wink.

“No matter who we are, where we've come from, what we believe, we all know this one truth,” Rodimus continued. “Love is what we share. It's what we're doing right.”

He stood between Minimus and Swerve now and placed one hand on Swerve's left shoulder and the other on Minimus' right. He looked them right in the optics.

“That's why you, Swerve and Minimus Ambus, are standing here today,” he said in a tone that might have been solemn if Minimus squinted.

Rodimus patted them and then gestured to the audience as a whole. “That's why all of you are here as well. Watching these two stand before me ready to make a commitment. Have we all not loved in our lifetimes? Loved and lost?”

Rodimus began to pace again, a slow and measured walk back and forth across the stage. In the background, the music grew a bit louder. Someone dimmed the lights. Minimus colored himself impressed.

“In this moment, we are reminded that the ability to love is the very part of us that burns brightest,” Rodimus said and he raised his hands to the sky, only to clench them and draw them back to his flame-covered chassis. “It is what separates us, what defines our spark.”

Behind Minimus, Megatron reset his vocalizer and politely coughed into his fist. It was as if he were subtly telling Rodimus to hurry up. Or not so subtly. Rodimus was giving the performance of the lifetime. Minimus was simultaneously touched and amused. Swerve looked as though he didn't know what to say.

Rodimus' spoiler twitched. He returned to the stage, taking his position up once again. He looked Swerve and Minimus in the optics and clasped his hands together in front of his abdominal plating.

“You fell in love by chance,” he said, “but you're here today because you are both making a choice. You are choosing each other. You are choosing to be with someone who enhances you, who makes you think, makes you smile and makes every day brighter just by sharing it with you.”

Minimus blinked. Surely those beautiful words weren't coming from Rodimus? They weren't quite the traditional script Minimus was used to hearing, but they were somehow better. More from the spark.

“Love is like that, you know,” Rodimus said and there was something soft in his vocals now, as though he had taken the words personally. “It comes from humble beginnings and through a

combination of serendipity and effort, imperfect beings shape it into something extraordinary. It's the process of making something beautiful when there was nothing at all. Something beautiful like the couple you see standing here today.”

Minimus' spark throbbed. He smiled before he could help himself. *Imperfect beings*. It resonated strongly with him.

“Now are you two prepared to publicly declare your commitment?” Rodimus asked.

Minimus nodded. “I am.”

“Me, too,” Swerve said with a nervous grin. His hand squeezed Magnus' once more.

“Great!” Rodimus gestured to each of them with a hand. “Turn toward one another. Swerve, place your right hand over Minimus' spark and Minimus, you place your right hand on Swerve's spark.”

They did so and chose to clasp their left hands together. It wasn't technically part of the ceremony, but it did leave them feeling more connected. Looking right at each other highlighted how happy Swerve was, even if Minimus had to tilt his helm just a little.

He could feel the rapid pulsing of Swerve's spark beneath his fingertips and wondered if Swerve could feel his own as well. Minimus was both elated and nervous and he felt that it showed. The weight of their witnesses seemed to crowd on his shoulders.

“Recognize the weight of the sparks beneath your fingers,” Rodimus continued as he brought his hands together, clasping them. “Recognize the responsibility that you will bear and share. Recognize that once you take your vows, these are the hands that will lift each other up.”

Minimus nodded and Swerve echoed him. They shared another glance and heat flooded Minimus' faceplate. In the background, the music went soft again. He all but heard the audience hold their collective breath and ventilations.

Rodimus looked at Minimus first, as the elder in the partnership, “Will you, Minimus Ambus, keep Swerve as your favorite person – to laugh with him, to go on adventures with him, to support him through life's tough moments. We've had so many of those after all. And do you vow to be proud of him, to age with him, and find new reasons to love him every day?”

Minimus worked his intake. He licked his lips. “I will,” he said. It wasn't even the hardest thing he'd ever promised.

Rodimus winked and turned to Swerve. “And will you, Swerve, keep--”

“I will!” Swerve blurted out, loud enough to echo in the ballroom and completely override Rodimus' recitation of the vows. His face instantly flooded with color and he ducked his helm.

Swerve squeezed Minimus' hand and looked him straight in the optic. “I mean,” he murmured with a cycled ventilation. “Yes, I will. I'll do all those things. For you. For both of you.”

Both of you.

Of course Swerve would remember how much Minimus felt torn between himself and the Magnus Armor. How he struggled to define himself and how he didn't want to lose either.

Minimus smiled, and it was the largest, most genuine smile he can ever remember himself giving. “Thank you, Swerve,” he murmured.

Swerve beamed back at him.

Rodimus coughed into his hand. “You two are precious,” he said. “Will you, Swerve and Minimus Ambus, vow to be each other's partners from this day forward? Will you bring out the best in one another, share your happiest moments together, and love each other absolutely – for the rest of this lifetime and in the Well thereafter?”

Minimus' hand shook as he tightened his grip on Swerve's. He felt Swerve squeeze him in return, their fields rising and mingling together. It began to feel more and more real with each passing moment.

“We will,” Swerve and Minimus said together, in perfect unison. They couldn't have planned it better if they tried.

Minimus repeated the words to himself, meeting and keeping Swerve's gaze as he did so. *I will*, he vowed, to both himself and to Swerve.

He wanted to try his hardest to make this work. He knew that Swerve felt the same.

“You are now one,” Rodimus said, his vocals humbled. He stepped closer and rested his hands over their joined ones. “May your bond bring to you every excitement. May you need each other always, not out of weakness, but out of joy. May you want one another always. May you look for things to praise, to lift each other higher, and ignore the smaller faults. May you have happiness and find it in each other. May you always have love, and find it in loving one another.”

Rodimus squeezed and then released their hands. He grinned and lifted his chain. “By the power invested in me as captain of this starship, I now pronounce you *conjunx endura*,” he declared with a resounding echo in the ballroom. “May your bond prove stronger with each passing cycle and may your love never dim.” He brought his hands together with a defining clap.

Swerve grinned.

Minimus did, too.

They leaned toward each other and shared their first kiss as a bonded couple. Swerve's lips trembled as they pressed against his and he ex-vented warmth down against Minimus. It sent a shiver down Minimus' spinal strut and though he knew they wouldn't be having a 'honeymoon' so to speak, it filled Minimus with heat.

Their arms wrapped around each other and the kiss deepened, Minimus daring to introduce his glossa and taste Swerve's joy for his own.

They might have continued if not for Skids activating the gong that announced the end of the ceremony and the successful conclusion of commitment. Minimus broke apart from Swerve with an embarrassed tilt of his helm. Swerve was too busy grinning to look ashamed.

His hand slid down Minimus' arm and linked their fingers together. They turned toward the crowd and bowed as one. They were officially legally bonded. Were this a true bonding, Minimus would be

changing their registered designations in the database. He would go to First Aid and tell him to change their medical records.

If his hopes held true, Minimus would still be doing those things. Only with genuine honesty behind it.

“Now, to recognize and celebrate the new couple, there's a reception in the dining hall,” Rodimus announced. “Hope to see you all there!”

The chimes continued to sound. The crowd began to murmur as everyone rose from their seats. No doubt the prospect of free snacks and celebration drew them.

Minimus turned back toward Rodimus.

“That was beautiful, Rodimus,” he whispered, all at once in awe of his captain, who he never expected was capable of anything well-meaning.

Rodimus' face visibly heated. He ducked his helm and rubbed the back of his neck. “Thanks,” he said. “I, uh, looked it up, you know. I mean, this is fake and all, but I still wanted to do it right.”

The urge to hug Rodimus in that moment was almost overwhelming. Minimus refrained, lest Rodimus think it okay in the future, but he did grab Rodimus' hand for a hearty shake.

“It was,” Swerve agreed with a hearty nod of his head. “It, um, almost made me cry. Thanks.”

“From both of us,” Minimus added, and he meant it. He was impressed. “You did a good job.”

Rodimus beamed at him. His field spiked with warmth and pleasure. Rodimus was, as always, so very susceptible to genuine praise.

“I know,” he said, in a flash back to his usual cocky self, but that brief moment of humility had been beautiful in itself. He squeezed Minimus' hand. “So let's get this reception over with and get the Pit off Exelon before anything else happens. Deal?”

Minimus blinked. “Wait. It worked?”

Rodimus flashed him a thumbs-up. “Sure thing. Especially since you didn't even notice. Then again, you really only had optics for Swerve.” He nudged Minimus with an elbow.

Swerve chuckled. “It was part of the show, right?” he asked, ducking his head. He inched closer to Minimus, their sides pressing together.

“Of course it was!” Rodimus clapped them both on the shoulder. He all but vibrated with relief. “Thanks to both of you, my spark is saved, your sparks are saved, everyone's sparks are saved.”

Minimus smiled. “I think Perceptor had a little something to do with it,” he commented in a dry tone.

“And Brainstorm,” Swerve added with a laugh.

Rodimus rolled his optics. “Yeah, yeah. The two nerds, too. Now, come on. Let's go before the Exelons get suspicious and shoot us out of orbit or something.”

Minimus wouldn't put it past them. He also made a mental note to mark Exelon Five as a place for no Cybertronian to visit. Ever.

There was only one more performance left to give.

Chapter End Notes

A/n: I've adapted this <http://offbeatbride.com/2015/02/nontraditional-non-religious-wedding-ceremony-script> for the wedding ceremony.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

In which Swerve and Minimus attend their reception and then afterward, consummate their marriage. Kind of. Also, Rodimus is treated to a startling revelation.

Chapter Notes

Characters this chapter: Ultra Magnus/Swerve, Rodimus, Alien OCs, Lost Light ensemble

Rated M for this chapter for some tactile facing

Commission Gift Fic for nothumanafterall.

Mood Music/Soundtrack - "In a World Like This," Backstreet Boys

They were waylaid before they entered the reception hall. Minimus and Swerve both tensed, Rodimus just behind them, as half a dozen Exelons intercepted them. Rodimus' hands were on their shoulders and Minimus felt them tremble.

If the Exelons insisted on taking away Rodimus now, it would lead to a fight which would probably result in casualties on either side. Perhaps the destruction of the entire *Lost Light*. The Exelons could not know that the bomb was deactivated, but that wouldn't stop them from firing upon the spaceship.

Alarm rippled through Minimus' spark. He worked his intake and prepared to draw upon every last bit of training he'd had as Ultra Magnus.

"We would like to extend our congratulations to you both," the Exelon in the lead said, knees dipping in a bow. Only then did Minimus notice the symbols adorning the Exelon's arms. He was a royal. "You two are truly in love."

"Thank you," Minimus replied with a dip of his own, a show of respect. Swerve mimicked him. "We appreciate the opportunity you allowed us. It would not have been possible without my captain."

"Yes," one of the other Exelons said, her voice cool. "Your captain. There is a certain matter of the debt he owes to us."

The royal in the lead lifted a hand as though to forestall her commentary. "Let us not be rude and sour a happy occasion," he said, voice far warmer and near-apologetic. "We have waited this long. Surely another few hours will not cause harm."

Rodimus' hands tightened in their grip, nearly leaving a dent in Minimus' softer armor. The captain's field vibrated with agitation.

Minimus lowered his gaze. "Your lenience is a blessing, your highness. We would be grateful for the opportunity. He is not only our captain but a dear friend."

“Then I think we can certainly allow it, as a favor and a gift for a couple as strong as yourselves.” The royal smiled, his eyes almost gentle and friendly, a welcome change from the near-violent looks the other Exelons offered. “We will enjoy celebrating with you as well.”

“We look forward to your joining us,” Minimus said.

“Thank you,” Rodimus added with a rush of ventilation. “You are very, very kind.”

The Exelon smiled again and preceded them into the reception, his guards and attendants crowding around him. The last tossed a glare over her shoulder, but said nothing.

Minimus would not breathe a sigh of relief until the Exelons were off the ship and the *Lost Light* was aiming for the stars.

“Don't worry,” Rodimus murmured, peeling his hands from their shoulders. “Megatron has a plan. Most of the Exelons will leave the party early. And for those who don't? He has another plan.”

Minimus looked over his shoulder, worry making his spark throb. “No killing,” he reminded Rodimus in a low tone.

If they killed anyone, the Exelons would make sure to come after the *Lost Light*. They might get angry about being unable to dispose of someone with a legitimate claim to the throne, but they would probably just let Rodimus go and put a warrant out for his arrest, should he return. But if they killed anyone? Nothing would stop the Exelons from seeking revenge.

Rodimus rolled his optics. “He knows. I've told him already. These are non-lethal. All of them. I made Perceptor double-check.”

Swerve sighed in relief, clutching at his chest. “Thank Primus.”

Minimus just wanted to get this over with. So he urged both Swerve and Rodimus into the reception hall. He immediately noticed that it was tightly packed and flush with bright lights and music. There was a dance floor yet again, Minimus made a mental note to take Swerve out on it, and there was a very large banner which read 'congratulations.' Well, after someone had crossed out the other announcements on it.

Was there only one banner in the entirety of the *Lost Light*?

Someone had set up a small table center stage and given the massive placecards, Minimus assumed it was meant for he and Swerve. Rodimus ushered them toward it, and they sat down, scrunched together. Minimus didn't mind being this close to Swerve, it was simply overwhelming.

Mechs and Exelons alike swung by to give them congratulations. Gifts were offered as well, something Minimus hadn't expected. There was not enough room on the table and they had to stack them under it and their chairs. Or stuff them in their subspace in some cases.

Tins of fancy wax from Smokescreen.

Cubes of flavored energon from Bluestreak, his own special blends that he was also hoping Swerve would start serving at his bar.

Flavored lubricant from Tailgate, whose faceplate was hot and colored, but no more so than Cyclonus who trailed along in Tailgate's wake obediently. Minimus was curious to see how that relationship would develop.

Then came Getaway and Skids, the former smirking and the latter vibrating with humor. Minimus was almost afraid to look in the box they brought, but Swerve had no such compunctions. He ripped open the box, only to squeak as he peered inside of it.

Minimus took a peek and felt his face flush hot. He was neither a virgin nor a prude, but it did seem inappropriate for these gifts to be given in a public venue. There were toys in the box, toys used for interfacing!

Swerve slammed the box shut and stammered a thank you. Minimus repeated it with a firm glare their direction.

Getaway gave them both a thumbs up and sauntered away. He and Skids highfived each other as they vanished into the crowd of dancers.

Rung brought by a couple of datapads, one filled with some of Minimus' favorite novels that he'd lost and the other programmed with Swerve's favorite game. Trust Rung to bring the most thoughtful gift.

And on and on it went.

At one point, Minimus had enough and popped up from their table. He took Swerve's hand and pulled him onto the dance floor. He was ridiculously pleased when Swerve's startled burst of confusion melted into utter happiness as they started to dance. This time, the beat was fast and they both made fools of themselves twisting and grinding around the dance floor.

Neither of them were any good at the fast dances.

But then the lights dimmed, the mood shifted as did the pace, and they were suddenly bathed in a spotlight.

It was time for their first dance as a couple, according to Blaster, and that was something Minimus could certainly do. He drew Swerve into his arms and they swayed together, much as they had that first time, that first dance, when Minimus first started to realize that his feelings for Swerve were much more complex than he could have ever expected.

They shared another kiss as a couple in the same way they shared their first dance, and it made Minimus' spark bloom with happiness. Each time kissing Swerve was hotter than the last, until it tested his resolve to wait until a more proper time. He kept his hands from wandering – they were in public after all – and when the song ended, he and Swerve bowed to a cheering audience.

Several dances later brought them back to their table, weary and thirsty. They sat and fed each other energon treats gifted to them by Hoist. They decided to enjoy their evening for what it was: a chance to get to know each other and enjoy each other.

They laughed with their friends. They enjoyed the music. They quietly celebrated with a very relieved Rodimus.

And one by one, the Exelons began to depart from the *Lost Light*.

“Go!” Rodimus all but shoved them out of the room and into the hallway.

Granted, it was pretty late, but still, the party was going strong. What would it look like if the newly married couple left?

Swerve wasn't exactly digging in his heels, but Minimus was reluctant to leave. Perhaps because he feared what would happen if he left Rodimus without any supervision. To be fair, he had a point.

“I promise. We have this well in hand and how weird would it look if we didn't send you two off to bond, huh?” Rodimus asked and with another push, they were outside the reception hall and in the corridor.

Rodimus flicked his hands at them. “Go.”

Minimus sighed. Swerve fought to hide his grin. Rodimus didn't yet know that a real relationship had developed. He couldn't wait to reveal that and see the look on Rodimus' face.

“Captain's orders,” Swerve said with a shrug. He offered Minimus his elbow. “Shall we?”

“Behave,” Minimus cautioned to his captain with a shake of his finger. “Yes, dear. Let's go. It is our wedding night after all.”

Swerve swallowed down a snicker and started down the corridor. He didn't look back at Rodimus, but he did hear the door shut behind them. He didn't know what Rodimus and Megatron's plan was and frankly, he didn't want to know. So long as it got the Exelons off the ship and the *Lost Light* off their planet.

“My habsuite is larger,” Minimus said as he patted Swerve's arm. “But if you'd be more comfortable...”

Swerve shook his head. “No. Your room's fine. It's better for couples anyway, right?”

“Right.” Minimus smiled at him and Swerve was pretty sure he'd never get over the sight of it.

“Was a good ceremony,” Swerve said, the memories bright at the back of his mind. He would cherish them for a long time, even if this didn't work out.

Minimus' field agreed with him. There was a soft joy within it that Swerve was glad to sense. Minimus deserved to be happy.

They made it to Ultra Magnus' habsuite and went inside, thankfully without encountering any of the crew. Most were probably still celebrating at the reception. The last two weeks had been nothing short of a vacation for the crew. They might as well enjoy it while it lasted.

“Um,” Swerve said as the door shut behind them and they were alone. “I know we're going to give this a try for real but--”

“We're not going to bond,” Minimus said. He squeezed Swerve's hand and pulled him toward the

berth. “That is a very serious step and not to be taken lightly and there is no going back from that. There are things I’d rather tell you than you discover yourself and I’m sure you have your secrets as well.”

Swerve nodded. He let Minimus tow him onto the berth where they arranged themselves with a level of comfort that was both surprising and wonderful. Swerve stretched out first with Minimus snuggled against him, their fields intermingling.

It was even better when Minimus leaned close to him, his optics blue and bright. “Might I kiss you, Swerve?”

“You know you don’t have to ask,” he said, his spark giving a flip of excitement. Especially when Minimus’ hand rested ever so chaste on his chestplate.

“I know.” His hands petted a soft rhythm over Swerve’s armor. “But I’m going to anyway. At least so long as we are still perpetuating this ruse.”

Swerve’s internals warmed. He loved that Minimus was so considerate. “Thank you.”

“You are very welcome.”

Minimus kissed him.

Swerve didn’t think much about anything else for awhile but the motion of Minimus against his frame and the taste and feel of Minimus’ lips. Swerve’s engine revved and heat pooled in his array, but he knew it wouldn’t go any further than some kissing and heavy petting. As much as he looked forward to the idea of seeing Minimus flushed with pleasure and perhaps post-interface, Swerve agreed.

It was too soon.

That didn’t mean they couldn’t enjoy themselves or that Swerve couldn’t map out Minimus’ frame with his fingertips or learn the way that Minimus tasted. Sweet and tangy, by the way, like the energon goodies they’d been feeding each other. Their fingers were sticky, too, and Swerve giggled to himself.

Maybe in the morning they could share a washrack and scrub each other. He imagined helping Minimus back into the Magnus Armor, something he’d never seen Minimus do for himself.

“What has you so giddy?” Minimus asked against his lips.

Swerve shook his head. Both of his hands swept down Minimus’ back. He hesitated at Minimus’ hip before he lightly brushed over Minimus’ aft. Feeling Minimus shiver above him was outright intoxicating.

“Just happy, I guess,” Swerve said. Heat flooded his frame with desire. His array stirred, valve slicking and spike swelling within its housing.

He kept both firmly locked down, however.

“We are remarkably fortunate,” Minimus agreed. His facial insignia tickled as he nibbled on the underside of Swerve’s jaw. “Despite the unfortunate circumstance that led to us perpetuating this

ruse, it had some a very positive outcome, for which I am grateful.”

Swerve wrapped his arms around Minimus and gave him a squeeze, half-tempted to tilt Minimus on his side and plant kisses all over tan and green armor. He could do that. He suspected Minimus wouldn't mind. But he didn't know if he could himself back down from doing more.

“Whatever happens, we can't tell Rodimus he is even partially to blame or thank,” Swerve said with a little laugh. “We'll never hear the end of it.”

Minimus chuckled. “How true.” He shivered when Swerve stroked his back again.

Swerve felt Minimus rock down against him. He felt the roll of Minimus' hips and the heat that wafted down against his frame. Minimus was getting just as charged as himself, a slow and steady climb that was almost sneaking up on him.

Swerve appreciated it.

“Oh, dear,” Minimus murmured. His fingers curled around the seams of Swerve's armor, pushing through to stroke the wire bundles beneath. “We seem to be approaching an impasse.”

Swerve forced his hands to still. His cooling fans hummed, spinning a little faster to dispel heat, but not so much he couldn't walk away if pressed. He was charged, could feel it licking at his substructure.

“I can leave,” Swerve offered, though his hands tightened on Minimus' hips. That wasn't what he wanted at all.

In fact, he wanted Minimus to get back to the business of kissing him. It was at once teasing and intoxicating. Swerve was mildly buzzed from all the engex and sweets and he didn't want anything about this evening to end.

“No,” Minimus murmured, his lips moving from the curve of Swerve's jaw back to his lips. His optics glowed a febrile blue in the dim. “You should stay. We could... continue?”

“I thought it was too soon?” Swerve asked. Not out of protest, oh no, but because it was polite. Because he wanted Minimus to know that he remembered and wasn't conveniently forgetting for the sake of pleasure.

He didn't want to screw anything up between them.

“It is.” Minimus' hips danced above his, a light scrape of metal on metal that sent resonating purrs through Swerve's entire frame. “But this amounts to... to what Ratchet would call heavy petting, yes? Tactile play?”

Swerve liked where this was going. His hands stroked up and down, from Minimus' shoulders to his aft and back again.

“Closed panels?” he suggested.

Minimus shivered again and charge nipped at Swerve's fingertips, little electric nibbles of Swerve's dermal net. “Yes,” he murmured and he pressed his forehead to Swerve's. “That is, if you are not opposed?”

Opposition was the furthest from Swerve's mind. This was practically self-service. No panels would be opened. No armor removed. No vulnerabilities revealed. Just some touching, some kissing, and the expulsion of extra charge. Why, it was practically medical necessity. Too much charge could cause damage after all.

“Not one bit,” Swerve said. He slid a hand up, cupped the back of Minimus' head, and pressed their mouths together.

He moaned as Minimus' glossa slid into his mouth, warm and sweet. Swerve rolled up against Minimus, the slide of their frames together producing another wave of charge. His array tingled, pinging him for release, and Swerve denied it.

He deepened the kiss, sweeping his glossa along the interior of Minimus' mouth, mapping it as best he could. Minimus caught his glossa and sucked on it and Swerve moaned again, well able to imagine Minimus' mouth on his spike. And Primus, even his own. He imagined pinning Minimus to the berth, teasing his panel open, and wrapping his lips around Minimus' spike. Or Magnus'. Did the armor even have interfacing systems?

Question for another time.

Right now, he had Minimus above him, armor slipping and sliding against Swerve's. Minimus radiated heat. Charge danced out from beneath his plating to nip at Swerve's, lighting up the dim of the room with static discharge.

He felt Minimus give a little shiver, heard the quiet noises that Minimus made, and Swerve's arousal doubled in intensity. His hands swept up and down Minimus' back, tracing every nook and cranny. He drew patterns in the curls of static that rose in his wake.

Minimus moved over him as though he were dancing, frame trembling with rising charge. He eased off the kiss to suck on Swerve's lips and then trailed kisses over Swerve's jaw and to his intake.

Swerve tipped his head back. He shook as warm nips on his neck cables made him twitch. His cooling fans roared, heat pulsing out from his frame. He could hear the quieter whirr of Minimus' fans. He tasted the rising desire in Minimus' field.

He never imagined that this would happen, that it could be possible. The gentle and steady climb toward overload left him feeling as though he were floating. Swerve's hands clamped down on Minimus' hips as he rocked upward with his own, closed and locked panels scraping together. The vibrations carried through their armor and resonated against his interfacing components.

Swerve lost all semblance of control. He tossed his head back and overloaded with a sharp intake. His entire frame tensed and lit up with charge. He groaned a string of syllables and hoped Minimus could recognize them as his name.

Above him, Minimus moaned. His face pressed to Swerve's intake and he shook. His fingers clamped on the edge of a transformation seam and held tight. He followed Swerve over, pleasure bursting in his field and the little squeak he released was beyond adorable.

Swerve held him through the tremors of overload, his own frame shaking. He was so deliriously happy, he was afraid to let go.

Minimus dragged his face out from his hiding place and pressed his lips briefly to Swerve's. He rebooted his vocalizer audibly. "See?" he said. "P-perfectly chaste."

Swerve laughed. "Semantics."

Minimus grinned and kissed him again.

It couldn't get any better than this.

0o0o0

The sound of a lock being overridden was what woke Minimus from recharge. He forced his entire frame into a fast boot and peered toward the door. Swerve stirred in his arms and mumbled something hazy before trying to snuggle back in and return to recharge.

It was adorable.

Minimus couldn't take the time to indulge because he heard the successful beep and click of a lock being opened. He had a second to prepare himself before Rodimus came striding into the room, hands over his head, and his intake free and clear of the collar.

"Morning, Sunshine!" he declared. "Guess who's bomb free and ready to--" Rodimus drew up short, one foot lifted as he prepared to step down. His optics locked on the berth. "Um. Am I actually interrupting something?"

To be fair, Minimus and Swerve were intimately entangled. Their panels had stayed attached all night and there were no fluids to speak of, but their frame language was not that of two friends platonically sharing a berth.

Minimus rubbed his face and extricated himself from Swerve's arms. "Rodimus, have a seat. We need to talk."

"Uh." Rodimus' optics flicked between Minimus and Swerve, who was still snoozing, and backed toward the chair. It was far too large for him and he looked lost as he flopped down into it. "About what?"

Minimus perched on the edge of the berth and tried to chase away the last of the recharge sleepiness. "There are developments between Swerve and I. Developments we could not have expected."

Rodimus blinked. "Wait," he said slowly, realization dawning. "Are you fragging telling me that Megatron was right and I now owe him a *month* of good behavior?"

"Megatron? Where!?"

Swerve bolted upright, his field flaring. His visor went bright with alarm and Minimus swiveled to lay a hand on Swerve's arm, calming him.

"Not here," Minimus said, swallowing down his amusement. "It's just Rodimus, more than a little surprised to come in and find us sharing a berth."

Swerve's head turned, recognizing Rodimus. His faceplate heated and he dragged himself into a sitting position next to Minimus. "Surprised? He's the one who sent us here."

"Yeah, so that the Exelons wouldn't get suspicious before we could boot them off, not because I thought you were actually fragging," Rodimus sputtered.

"Rodimus!" Minimus snapped, giving his captain a glare. "Watch your language. And while it's none of your business, we were not... we are not ready for that level yet."

Rodimus blinked and palmed his face. His spoiler fluttered. "I can't believe Megatron was right. You two hooked up for real. I told him it was impossible. That you two were just really good actors. And here you are, legit sharing a berth, and I owe Megatron a month of good behavior. Do you have any idea how long he's going to hold that over my head? How smug he's going to be?"

Minimus planted his hands on his hips and stared at his captain. "Is that all you have to say? You're more concerned with some... some bet you lost?"

Rodimus waved a dismissive hand. "No, no. Of course not. I mean, yay. Good for you. So glad you're happy." He paused and his gaze whipped toward them. "Wait. Does that mean you're not going to go through with the annulment?"

Swerve's hand slipped into his. Minimus looked at him with a shared smile.

"No," Minimus answered. "Not anytime soon. We want to see where this takes us."

Swerve's field flooded with joy. He squeezed Minimus' hand.

"Wow," Rodimus breathed, his optics cycling wider. "I never would have guessed. Um. Congratulations, I suppose. You really need your honeymoon now, don't you?"

Minimus' lips curved into a smile. "If you can spare us. We'd like the opportunity to get to know one another without the threat of your death hanging over our heads."

"That was kind of a mood-killer," Swerve sighed.

Rodimus chuckled. "Yeah. I'll bet." He slapped his thighs and pushed to his feet. He looked at them again with a shake of his head. "So we told everyone your honeymoon was two weeks so let's just go with that. Afterward, we gotta quest to complete."

"Works for me," Swerve said.

"That does sound like a plan," Minimus agreed.

Rodimus scratched at his chin. "Good then. That's, uh, really good. So I'll just be going now. And you two can go back to whatever it was you were doing. I don't want to know the details."

"Don't make it sound so lewd," Minimus chastised.

Swerve laughed.

Rodimus waved his hands and backed toward the door. "I don't want to know. I really don't. So you

two enjoy your two weeks and I'll go tell Megatron the good news.”

Rodimus excused himself before Minimus could form a retort. Shaking his head, Minimus turned back toward Swerve.

“That went well, at least,” he said. “Rodimus can be embarrassingly dense sometimes.”

“While Megatron is weirdly perceptive apparently.” Swerve laughed. He leaned in close, pressing his forehead to Minimus'. “So. Two weeks, huh? What are we going to do with ourselves?”

Minimus rested his hand on Swerve's thigh and stroked lightly upward. “I'm sure we'll think of something,” he purred.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Characters this chapter: Ultra Magnus/Swerve, Rewind, Tailgate, Lost Light Ensemble
Rated M for this chapter for sticky and tactile and spark facing. All of the NSFW
Time passes. Swerve and Magnus grow closer. And then they take the last plunge. All's
well that end's well.
Commission Gift Fic for nothumanafterall.
Mood Music/Soundtrack - "Here (In Your Arms)," Hellogoodbye

They spent the next two weeks almost exclusively in one another's company. It was hardly a trial for Ultra Magnus or Minimus, though sometimes the lack of work bothered him. Swerve didn't do anything more than smile when Magnus took a few hours to catch up on some reports and paperwork before devoting the rest of his time to Swerve.

They talked about everything. Any topic they could bring up, nothing too big or too small. They discussed genuine concerns for the future. They discussed living arrangements – Swerve would move in with Ultra Magnus as his habsuite was much larger – and legal measures. First Aid was updated regarding their status as *conjunx endura* and Ultra Magnus transferred all of Swerve's future disciplinary measures, should any be needed, to Megatron's discretion.

That fact alone, he suspected, meant Swerve would be misbehaving a lot less in the future. Not that Megatron would harm him or offline him if he bent the rules, but Megatron was a lot more intimidating than Ultra Magnus. This fact didn't even upset Magnus anymore. It was hard to compete with a Decepticon warlord for intimidation.

The first time they actually popped their panels to interface, it was as spontaneous as their first tactile overloads. They were snuggled together watching a movie, Minimus still in the Magnus Armor, when snuggling hands turned to wandering hands turned to groping hands.

Swerve's cooling fans were the first to click on, but Ultra Magnus was the first to draw Swerve up to him for a kiss. He cupped an arm under Swerve's aft and held Swerve up against his chassis, sealing their lips together with a kiss that made them both groan. Heat flashed lightning-quick into their energy fields.

Kissing led to more, led to Swerve stroking Ultra Magnus' antennae with his fingertips and Ultra Magnus shaking with need. He licked over Swerve's front vents and moaned when Swerve rocked against him. His field buzzed with desire.

Swerve's panels were the first to click open as he made a muffled sound of embarrassment. He muttered an apology and tried to draw back, but Ultra Magnus made a choice. He hefted Swerve up further and took Swerve's spike into his mouth, glossa lashing at the damp tip and swallowing the entire unit.

Swerve outright shouted and curled over his helm, hips trembling from the effort of keeping himself from thrusting down Ultra Magnus' intake. He spoke, he stammered really, encouragement and

gratitude and praise. His vocal response made Ultra Magnus hotter, his own panels threatening to pop.

Magnus' hands curled around Swerve's thighs. He sucked harder, glossa lapping at Swerve's spike and he heard Swerve stammer a warning. Blunt hands grasped at his helm, stroking his antennae, but Magnus didn't back off. He took Swerve as deep as he could manage and was rewarded with Swerve shouting his overload, transfluid spilling over Magnus' glossa and down his intake.

It was hot, Swerve's ex-vents blasting his face and chassis. It was messy, Swerve's transfluid coating his oral cavity and making his lips sticky. It was abrupt and startling, but Ultra Magnus didn't have it in him to be embarrassed. Not as he slowly lowered Swerve back down, except Swerve grabbed him by the head and kissed him. He nipped at Magnus' lips, thrust his glossa into Magnus' mouth, and kissed him as though his spark depended on it.

Both of Magnus' panels popped at once. He wasn't the slightest bit embarrassed.

Swerve looked down and whistled. "Well," he said with a thick, heated pulse of his field. "That answers that question."

Despite himself, Ultra Magnus chuckled. "You considered the size of my equipment?"

"Many, many times." Swerve's faceplate heated. "Of course I'm not the only one. I figured if you were packing, it was proportional." His glossa swept over his lips. "You wanna, um, you wanna frag me?"

Ultra Magnus' engine revved hard enough to vibrate the berth. "I shouldn't," he said, but it was barely more than a whisper. His spike throbbed.

Swerve squirmed, shifting down toward his spike, valve dripping lubricant onto the tip as though teasing him. "Yes, yes, you should," he insisted. Fingers curled around the seams of Magnus' armor as he rocked his hips down, but Magnus' grip on him kept Swerve from sinking onto Magnus' spike.

"I'll hurt you," Ultra Magnus said.

Swerve shook his head, looking up at him with an optical band brightly lit with arousal. "Not at all," he said and licked his lips again. "I, um, might have practiced. Just in case. So you won't hurt me. I promise. Can't I make you feel good, too?"

"You could always spike me?" Ultra Magnus suggested and oh, his valve tightened at the thought. He imagined Swerve stroking him sweetly and then sliding into him, giving something for his hungry sensors to latch onto.

"Next time." Swerve pushed down again, the lip of his valve catching on the head of Magnus' spike. "Right now, though, I want this in me. Please?"

There was something about Swerve being assertive, saying what he wanted, that made it impossible for Ultra Magnus to deny him. He cycled a ventilation.

"You will tell me if I hurt you," he demanded.

"Of course." Swerve's intake bobbed. His hands clawed at Ultra Magnus' chest. "I promise. But you won't. I know you won't."

Primus.

Ultra Magnus tried to calm himself, but the need in Swerve's field was intoxicating. He nodded and lowered Swerve even further, keeping his grip firm on Swerve's hips. Swerve squirmed in his hands and gasped as Ultra Magnus' spike caught the folds of his valve and nosed beyond them.

Ultra Magnus' ventilations hitched as he slipped deeper and deeper into Swerve, valve calipers stretching and rippling around him. Swerve's internal nodes were swollen and they snapped charge at Magnus' receptors. He shivered as his cooling fans ticked into overdrive.

Swerve outright moaned, hands clawing at the air as his spike repressurized in quick succession. There was no pain in his field, only delirious pleasure as Swerve sank down on Ultra Magnus' spike until he felt the head of it nudge against Swerve's ceiling node. Swerve's hips danced, lubricant squeezing out from around Ultra Magnus' spike to dampen his pelvic plating.

“Okay?” Ultra Magnus asked, his thumb stroking Swerve's hip cables.

Swerve nodded with a little humming whimper, one hand dropping to his spike where he squeezed it. “Fine,” he breathed and squirmed. “*Move*, Magnus. Wanna feel you overload.”

It was impossible to resist, to say no to something that Swerve clearly wanted as much as Ultra Magnus did. He reminded himself, over and over, to be careful. He kept his grip firm, he pushed up into Swerve, swiveling his hips to prolong the pleasure, to ensure that Swerve enjoyed it as much as he did. Ultra Magnus felt himself trembling from withheld charge. His spike throbbed as Swerve's valve hungrily cycled down upon it.

He kept his pace slow and measured, and all it did was ramp up the charge on an exponential level. Magnus' ventilations came faster and faster as Swerve took it upon himself to rise and sink down on Magnus' spike. Pleasure filled Magnus to the brim, cycling higher and higher inside of him, tightening into a coiled spring.

Swerve, too, was panting, his hands dropping to grip Magnus' wrists, his optical band flaring with each thrust. Charge spat and danced over his armor. His valve was hungry and hot and could Magnus really blame himself for succumbing to it? He felt as though he'd been on the edge for weeks.

Overload all but took him by surprise. Magnus gasped, words strangled at the back of his intake, as charge rippled through his frame. He spilled into Swerve, his transfluid joining the mess of lubricant leaking from Swerve's valve.

Swerve threw his helm back, backstrut arching. “Magnus,” he moaned, drawing out the last glyph, and then he shook, following Magnus over. His valve convulsed and his spike spat a thin stream of transfluid. His fingers clenched tightly enough to leave impressions in the thinner metals of Magnus' wrist.

He didn't mind one bit. Not when Swerve's pleasure was so obvious to see.

Swerve made a humming sound deep in his chassis. “So much for waiting,” Swerve murmured. His frame continued to twitch, giving off little zaps of charge.

Ultra Magnus winced, his own frame warm with the last vestiges of overload. “I apologize. I should

have been--”

Swerve's valve clenched down. He leaned forward, nuzzling against Magnus' lower frame. “Shhh,” he said. “Don't apologize for that. Dear Primus, don't apologize for that. I'd be a lot happier, instead, if you let me do it again.”

Magnus' internals tightened with want. “We shouldn't,” he said, but his hands were already curling around Swerve once more. His hips had taken a rhythm of their own. He briefly lamented their size difference as he wanted to kiss Swerve and was not flexible enough to do so in their current position.

“Should,” Swerve repeated and he arched his backstrut, valve seeping a mix of transfluid and lubricant, making for quite the mess. “Can't we just focus on what we want instead?”

It was hard to argue with that. Point of fact, Ultra Magnus didn't want to. He wanted to touch Swerve and kiss him and give in to the pleasure they'd been denying themselves all along.

“All right,” Ultra Magnus murmured and he cupped Swerve's face with one hand, his thumb stroking over Swerve's lips. “Let us indulge one another.”

Swerve grinned, a smile that lit up both his faceplate and his field.

It seemed they would get their honeymoon after all.

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There were more dates, more talks, more stolen kisses and laughs and times when they gave into temptation.

Eventually, they had to return to their duties. Two weeks was not long enough, according to Swerve. Ultra Magnus had been antsy because he missed his work, but luckily, Swerve patted him on the arm and didn't take it personally.

“It's okay. I understand,” he'd said with a little chuckle and an uptilt of his head, the way he'd learned to request a kiss. “Work, for you, is fun.”

Ultra Magnus had sagged with released tension. Previous partners had not understood that aspect of his personality. Even before the Magnus Armor entered the picture, Minimus Ambus had been a mech devoted to work and the Magnus Armor had only made that easier.

“Thank you,” he'd said and swept Swerve into an embrace and a kiss that prompted his smaller partner to wriggle and laugh and grope at him.

They were almost late for their first shift back.

Rodimus welcomed them with open arms and wagging orbital ridges. Ultra Magnus ignored him. Megatron grunted something that sounded like 'congratulations' but a humor lurked in his red optics. He was probably still smug over the bet he had won, Magnus reasoned.

Then came the not fun part. The part where he and Swerve both had to explain to others that no, they

weren't spark-bonded yet. That they didn't truly start dating until they left Exelon Five. That yes, it had been a ruse up until that point, but it was real now. And no, they weren't going to answer those personal questions, thank you very much Whirl.

It really was no one's business but everyone seemed to think it was. Uncomfortable question after uncomfortable question prompted Magnus to make a general statement and forget about the rest.

Eventually, things went back to normal. Well, normal for the *Lost Light*, and the new normal which was his and Swerve's relationship. Ultra Magnus was rather happy of that particular development.

It meant meeting Swerve for meals and sharing a berth and contacting his partner in the middle of the day just because he could. It was Swerve popping his helm into the bridge just to say hello or Ultra Magnus spending more time in the bar without the purpose of arresting Swerve for every tiny infraction.

That particular job was now Megatron's. Which made it easier for Ultra Magnus to relax and ignore the rule-breaking.

It also meant more time spent as Minimus. He was becoming as comfortable outside the Magnus Armor as he was within it. Swerve never blinked twice when he arrived no matter what shape he was in.

Ultra Magnus adored that about him. He actually adored a lot of things about Swerve. It was becoming increasingly clear that he was in it for the long haul, just like Swerve.

Ultra Magnus had to admit that he liked the sound of that.

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For the most part, revealing that it had started as a ruse went over well with the crew. Most of them didn't care enough about Swerve's private life to take it personally. Tailgate squealed, called the whole thing ridiculously romantic, and treated Swerve to a special Tailgate hug.

Seriously, there was nothing in the world quite like a Tailgate hug. He gave the best ones and Swerve did not have a reasonable explanation as to why.

And then there was Rewind, whose reaction Swerve should have expected. He was a bit more practical than Tailgate, always had been, and this Rewind was one who'd lived through a DJD attack. It made him very protective of those close to him.

Rewind stared. Swerve absolutely did not wince.

“Wait.” Rewind held up a hand, looking away for a moment to cycle a ventilation before he looked at Swerve again. “Are you telling me that Ultra Magnus forced you to marry him?”

“No, no.” Swerve shook his head and his hands. “It wasn't like that. It was more like we were required to marry each other. For Rodimus.”

Rewind's visor dimmed. “For Rodimus,” he said flatly.

Swerve couldn't see him frowning, but he suspected that's what Rewind was doing all the same. His field flared with anger, as though he planned to march two decks down and give Ultra Magnus a piece of his mind.

“We could have annulled it. We just didn't want to,” Swerve explained, and there it was again, that giddy smile he couldn't seem to get rid of lately. “Ultra Magnus was willing to give a relationship between us a try and I'm happy, Rewind. I really am.”

Rewind stared at him for a long, long moment. “You're sure?”

“Triply sure.” Swerve let his field loose, highlighting the joy in it. “It started out fake. I was so sure that was all it could ever be. But the more time we spent together, the more real it started to be. Until Ultra Magnus finally admitted that he had feelings for me and we needed to give it a try. Now we're married and if all goes well, we'll stay that way.”

“Hmm.” Rewind leaned back in his chair, for once the light off, proving that he wasn't recording. “Fine. I believe you. I still think it was a slag thing to do.”

Swerve rolled his shoulders. “Well, we had to save Rodimus. And then we had to save our sparks, too. Besides, it wasn't the worst thing that could happen.”

“And it turned out good in the end,” Rewind observed.

Swerve grinned and made no attempt to hide it. “Yeah,” he agreed. “It really did.”

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Then there came a time, Ultra Magnus could not pinpoint it exactly but Minimus preferred to be vague as it was more romantic, when Minimus looked at Swerve and realized he could spend the rest of his functioning with Swerve and he'd be happy to do it. They had their disagreements from time to time as all couples did, but they powered through them. Minimus thought that he couldn't think of a single reason to say no, but over two dozen reasons to say yes.

He broached the topic the next time they were alone, when careful manipulation of the schedule ensured that they would share the next two off-shifts together.

Minimus divested himself of the Magnus Armor and pulled Swerve into his arms. He was always filled with happiness when Swerve reached back without hesitation, and the gleam of joy in Swerve's visor was as equal for Ultra Magnus as it was for Minimus Ambus.

“I want to ask you something,” Minimus said. One hand stroked Swerve's face and then rested lightly on the side of his cowling. “Please understand that you are not obligated to agree or that I will not be offended if you refuse. I will know if you are conceding simply to make me happy.”

Swerve leaned into his touch, his hands settling more firmly around Minimus' frame. “Okay,” he said and cycled a ventilation. “Ask.” Not a hint of a stammer or a blush.

Swerve was finally comfortable around Minimus, finally reassured that Minimus wanted to be in his

life. He no longer felt as though he had something to prove or worry that Minimus would walk away.

Further evidence that now was the perfect time to ask.

“We are married,” Minimus said and leaned in, pressing their foreheads together. He loved the intimacy of it. “Now I wish to bond with you. I am confident that it is the right choice. I love you, Swerve. And I am ready.”

Swerve's optical band reset. His hands clutched tighter at Minimus. “Are you asking...?”

“If you are ready to bond with me?” Minimus filled in for him. He curved his lips in a smile. “Yes, I am.”

“Yes,” Swerve breathed, and pressed all the closer, their frames so flush Minimus could feel the heat of Swerve's plating and the hum of his idling engine. “I am, too. I love you. Feel like I always have, but I wanted you to be ready and I didn't want to rush and, and...” He paused to cycle a ventilation. “Yes, Minimus. I'm ready to bond with you.”

Minimus smiled and pulled Swerve into a kiss, a gentle, open-mouthed press of their lips. He felt the nudging of Swerve's field against his, seeking to twine together, and Minimus allowed it. It was a pleasure to feel Swerve's love and joy pulsing alongside his own.

“Now?” Minimus asked against Swerve's lips.

Swerve's answer was to open his chestplates, the click and slide of its internal mechanisms erotically loud in the soft silence. Minimus stared down between them as the brilliant white of Swerve's spark came into view, glowing and pulsing with erratic bursts. He felt the cool heat of it against his own frame and Minimus' spark surged forward, eager to meet it.

This would only be the first step toward a spark bond. They would need many, many more mergings to make it permanent. But it was a step Minimus was ready and eager to take.

“Beautiful,” Minimus whispered. He slipped a hand between their frames and delicately stroked around the rim of Swerve's sparkchamber.

Swerve shivered and pushed his chassis toward Minimus. Charge rippled over his armor, lighting up the room. His hands curled around Minimus' frame, grasping onto his hips and holding tight.

“Let me see yours?” he asked, vocals as hushed as Minimus' own.

“Gladly.” Minimus spared a moment of concentration, triggering his panels to open.

Secondary and tertiary armor slid aside, revealing the swirling glow of his green spark. It brightened the space between them, large tendrils already reaching for the white glow of Swerve's spark.

It seemed his spark had known all along what his processor took a while to confirm.

Swerve inched him closer. Minimus leaned in to close the gap between them.

“Ready?” he asked, lips brushing over Swerve's.

“More than,” Swerve breathed.

Their chassis came together with a chime of metal on metal. Minimus felt his spark reach out and Swerve's answer, felt the first tug, and then the flush of pleasure. It wasn't a physical sensation, not like the press of their plating, or the chuffs of Swerve's ventilations, or the touch of Swerve's fingers. But Minimus swore he felt it all the same.

His entire frame tingled. His awareness drew inward, to a sense of self he so rarely touched, and when he looked through it, he could see Swerve on the other side. Smiling, yet insecure. Happy, yet hurting. Bright and bold and beautiful. Minimus reached for him with metaphorical hands and felt Swerve reach back. Swerve's core touched Minimus' own, secrets revealing themselves one by one.

It was not unlike an Earth flower, unfurling itself to the rising sun, Minimus realized. True, it was a romantic thought, perhaps even unlike himself. Maybe that was Swerve's influence; maybe Minimus himself had been romantic all along.

They notched together like two pieces of a puzzle. Pleasure streamed between them, not quite physical or tangible, but a sense of content and belonging. It made Minimus' figurative self smile. It made his physical self pull Swerve all the closer. It made time, the false construct that it was, seem to stop as if waiting.

He felt Swerve's love, bright and deep and enduring. It touched all the aching corners of Minimus' spark, examined them, and accepted them.

It was all Minimus had ever wanted.

There wasn't an overload, not in the physical sense of the word, but there was a bloom of pleasure, of rightness. Minimus felt himself surfacing from the depths of his consciousness. He felt himself again, and no longer the amalgam that involved Swerve.

There was an immediate but brief sense of loss. There on the edge of his spark, he sensed something else. Someone else.

Someone who wasn't himself.

Minimus knew that tiny, fledgling, and near-invisible tether was what connected him to Swerve. The more they merged, the stronger it would become, until not even death could separate them.

Minimus' optics onlined to the sight of Swerve looking back at him, their arms wrapped around each other's frames. Their chestplates had slid back shut, a defense mechanism, but Minimus could still feel the beat of Swerve's spark against his own.

“Wow,” Swerve murmured.

“Indeed.” Minimus pressed their foreheads together. “Thank you, Swerve. I am truly glad to have met you.”

Swerve's fingers tightened around his own. “I feel like I should be thanking you. I mean, I trusted you when you said you loved me, but to actually feel it. I don't think I know the words to describe that. It was amazing.” His optical band shifted toward Minimus. “You really think of me as beautiful.”

“And you like whatever form I take,” Minimus countered with a smile. “We are well-matched.”

Swerve nuzzled against him. “Of course we are.”

Their plating fit together. Their fields hummed in unison. Minimus was happier than he could ever remember being.

So this was what contentment felt like.

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Gossip spread quickly. Then again, didn't it always?

Swerve was treated to an outpouring of congratulations, only this time, he could return it sincerely. He couldn't stop smiling either. His face hurt from the effort. That mean he wanted it to stop though.

He was happy. He didn't know he could be this happy.

Rodimus didn't notice. He had to have someone explain it to him, which turned out to be a very smug Megatron who once again, won a bet with his co-captain. Rodimus yelled at him about always being right.

Megatron's laugh scared more than a few Autobots right off the bridge.

Rewind told anyone who would listen their quote-unquote romantic story, complete with visual aids in the form of all the footage he'd shot. He went around interviewing everybody and compiling together a love story the likes of which no one had seen in quite some time.

Wasn't it cute, Rewind was fond of saying, that the only way Ultra Magnus and Swerve managed to get together was to save Rodimus' life. It was both loyal and romantic and twanged the spark strings of everyone who heard it.

Rodimus, of course, took credit for everything. Just like Swerve knew he would.

Truthfully, he and Ultra Magnus didn't mind.

They were together. They were happy. And come the Pit or alien attack or Rodimus' bad luck, they would stay that way.

Bonus Scene

Chapter Summary

Universe: IDW, MTMTE

Characters this chapter: Ratchet, Drift, Ultra Magnus/Swerve, Rewind, Tailgate

Now with 100% more Ratchet.

Commission Gift Fic for nothumanafterall.

Ratchet could not believe his audials. Beside him, Drift was trying – and failing – to hide his laughter.

“You did what?” Ratchet asked.

“It's a really good story,” Swerve said with a giggle. He was almost obscenely happy, Ratchet noticed. It was a little weird.

“I have most if it on film,” Rewind piped up.

“It was the only option.” Tailgate nodded sagely and clasped his hands under his chin. “Isn't it romantic?”

“No.” Ratchet scowled and shook his head. “It's fragging stupid.”

Ultra Magnus bristled, every inch of him, as he sat there with Swerve perched on his lap and a dopey smile on his face. “I beg your pardon?”

“Why didn't you just tell them Rodimus was a Prime? That he was legally incapable of taking another throne?” Ratchet demanded, incredulity growing with every passing moment. “It should have immediately disqualified him by law of the Galactic Council!”

Every last one of those dumb afts blinked at him. Even Ultra Magnus, who should have known better, looked surprised and perplexed.

“Why... didn't you think of that?” Rewind was the first to venture as he planted his hands on his hips. “Aren't you supposed to have all the rules memorized or something?”

“Um.” Ultra Magnus blinked.

It was the first time Ratchet had ever seen him flabbergasted.

“To be fair, it was Rodimus' idea,” Swerve jumped in to say, eager to defend his *conjunx endura* and wow, that was really blowing Ratchet's mind.

Ratchet rolled his optics. “Right. Because listening to Rodimus' solutions has always been the smarter course of action.”

Silence. Embarrassed silence.

“Um,” Ultra Magnus said.

Ratchet sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Next to him, Drift forewent his restraint and burst into gales of laughter, tipping out of his chair.

That's it. No more adventures. Ratchet couldn't leave these fools alone anymore. See what they did without him?

Granted, Ultra Magnus and Swerve were cute together and ridiculously affectionate and were surprisingly well-matched. It was a happy outcome to something that could have gone so terribly wrong.

Still.

Ratchet wasn't leaving these idiots again anytime soon.

Obviously, he was the only voice of reason around here. These kids needed looking after. Sadly, he was the only one who could do it.

Funny how he really didn't seem to mind.

THE END

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